

# House of Lords rejects banning of hybrid embryos

LONDON – The House of Lords has rejected a move to ban the creation of human-animal hybrid embryos for research.

Lord Alton, a Catholic, introduced the amendment during a Jan. 15 debate on the Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill. The amendment sought to forbid the mixing of human gametes with animal gametes to bring about the creation of an interspecies embryo, or to keep or use an interspecies embryo.

The amendment was defeated after the government forced Labor Party legislators to either vote in favor of the legislation or face disciplinary action.

The government intends to license scientists to create embryos that are 99.9 percent human and 0.1 percent cow or rabbit.

The bill also would allow research on hybrids created by mixing animal and human sperm and eggs, embryos created by adding animal DNA to human embryos, and embryos created by adding animal cells to a human embryo. The embryos would be destroyed within 14 days of their creation.

The House of Commons will vote on the bill in February; it could become law later this year.

However, on Jan. 17, following the vote in the House of Lords, the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority, a government agency, granted one-year licenses to two centers to carry out research on hybrids. King's College London and Newcastle University will be able to begin such research before the law is changed to allow it.

In a Jan. 17 statement on this decision, Josephine Quintavalle of the lobby Comment on Reproductive Ethics called it “highly contentious,” partly because “the issue is currently being debated in Parliament and as yet has not been decided democratically.”

Meanwhile, Lord Alton, who sits as an independent, argued that the technology was a “scientific sideshow” that would lead Great Britain into a “blind alley” because it was not likely to produce any therapies.

He said there has been a refusal “to celebrate the life-giving qualities of adult stem cells, which are already being used and which pose none of the ethical dilemmas that this kind of legislation holds for so many of us.”

“Instead of concentrating our efforts on their development and application through things such as the routine collection of (umbilical-)cord blood cells, we are instead being invited to cross the Rubicon,” Lord Alton said. “If we permit the creation of these predominantly human interspecies embryos and full hybrids, we will be crossing an important ethical line – crossing human and animal. But for what? For the sake of a technology that we know will not be the future.”

However, Lord Darzi, federal health minister, said the government was “more confident than ever” that the end result would be new treatments for diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s.

Lord Winston, a Labor Party legislator, said that if Lord Alton’s amendment prevented such research “we would kill the huge potential benefit to patients. That seems wrong.”

The debate came a day after Scotland’s Catholic bishops urged British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to allow Labor legislators to vote in accordance with their consciences on plans to create human-animal hybrids.

They said the “personal integrity” of politicians “is essential both in regard to their private lives, which should conform to their public stances, and their votes, which should reflect their ethical convictions in issues of justice and morality.”