

Anti-cloning bill put on hold for fear of limiting research

By JIM ABRAMS
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WASHINGTON — A Senate bill to ban human cloning was put on indefinite hold yesterday when lawmakers from both parties expressed concerns that it could slow scientific research.

Despite overwhelming opposition to the idea of human cloning, supporters of the bill, promoted by the Republican leadership, could muster only 42 votes to bring it to the Senate floor, well short of the 60 needed. Twelve Republicans joined all 42 voting Democrats in keeping the bill off the floor.

Among those Republicans, two spoke of diseases that had affected their families and the importance of keeping all avenues open for new treatments.

Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., said his daughter had diabetes, and "I am concerned that this bill may be written so broadly that it will restrict future promising research which could lead to improved treatment."

Sen. Connie Mack, R-Fla., said he lost his father, mother and brother to cancer and he and his wife had both been diagnosed with the disease. Go slow on legislation, he said, "so we have the opportunity to hear from those patient groups who represent

people like myself."

The main sponsors of the legislation, Sens. Christopher Bond, R-Mo., and Bill Frist, R-Tenn., stressed that their bill would not impede existing scientific research in in vitro fertilization, stem cells, transplantation or animal cloning.

What it would do is ban somatic cell nuclear transfer, the procedure used to clone the Scottish sheep Dolly, when it is used to clone a human embryo. It calls for prison terms of up to 10 years.

Supporters called for quick action on the bill after Chicago physicist Richard Seed said last month that he planned to clone a human.



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The cloning of human embryos, Bond said, could "lead us down the slippery slope that would allow the creation of masses of human embryos as if they were assembly line

products, not human life."

But the White House also said the bill was "too far-reaching because it would prohibit important biomedical research" and said a more reasonable approach was a bill offered by Sens. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass.

Their bill does not ban the technique but puts a 10-year moratorium on the implantation of cloned cells in a uterus, which would be necessary to create a cloned human being.

Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee Chairman Jim Jeffords, R-Vt., who voted to stop immediate action on the bill, said he hopes to hold hearings on the issue.

Anti-abortion groups that contend it is wrong to clone human embryos simply for research purposes favor the Frist-Bond bill, but patient and scientific groups oppose it. Feinstein offered a letter signed by 27 Nobel laureates expressing concern about limits on research.

Even without legislation to ban human cloning, the Food and Drug Administration has the authority to regulate the practice. Scientists who want to begin cloning research would have to go through an application process, and the FDA has said that cloning raises serious health concerns for the fetus and the health of the mother.