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Bank for Human Stem Cells Starts Ethics Debate in Spain

By DALE FUCHS

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MADRID, Feb. 14 — The nation's first public stem cell bank has ignited a political battle over the regulation of medical research in Spain that uses human embryos.

A debate over the ethics of the research was fueled Thursday after South Korean scientists reported that they had cloned a human embryo, then culled the stem cells to develop therapeutic treatments.

The regional government of Andalusia has pledged \$5 million in research grants and invested \$1 million in laboratories and other equipment for the stem cell bank, which opened in late January at a public university hospital in Granada. It is the cornerstone of a biomedical research complex designed to transform the province's quaint image, said Andalusia's health director, Francisco Vallejo.

The bank will screen, cultivate and store stem cell lines, which are select groups of not-yet-specialized cells able to generate diverse tissues. Scientists say the unique properties of the cells may lead to new treatments for diabetes and other diseases.

The conservative central government in Madrid, however, has filed a lawsuit in Constitutional Court, contending that it has regulatory control over research on embryonic stem cells, which are extracted from days-old embryos left over, then frozen, during in-vitro fertilization trials.

Health Minister Ana María Pastor said that the government did not intend to obstruct such research but that, under revisions in a law on assisted reproduction, the research must be supervised by the national government.

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In early February, she announced a plan for the government to set up its own "transplant and regenerative medicine" center in Madrid, which would coordinate stem cell research trials and train scientists. Then, on Friday, Deputy Prime Minister Javier Arenas said the government opposed cloning human embryos for medical research.

Mr. Vallejo and other Andalusian officials say the new legislation is a ploy to block the cell bank project. With national elections scheduled for March, they contend, Prime Minister José María Aznar and his conservative Popular Party passed the revisions to appease religious groups that oppose the use of human embryos for therapeutic research.

"In this transcendental question, the most reactionary sectors of Opus Dei and the Legionaries of Christ continue to set the pace for the Popular Party," the spokesman for Andalusia's governing Socialist Party, José Caballos Mojeda, wrote in an op-ed article in *El País* in November after the measure was approved.

The revised law allows scientists to conduct studies using human embryos obtained through in-vitro fertilization, but it imposes many conditions. The embryos, for instance, must have been already frozen for more than five years at the time the law goes into effect.

The progenitors' consent is also required, a move that paves the way to creating "a catalog for each embryo showing who the parents are and how the embryo can be handled," said Manuel de Santiago, an endocrinologist who is president of the Spanish Association of Bioethics, which lobbied for the legislation.

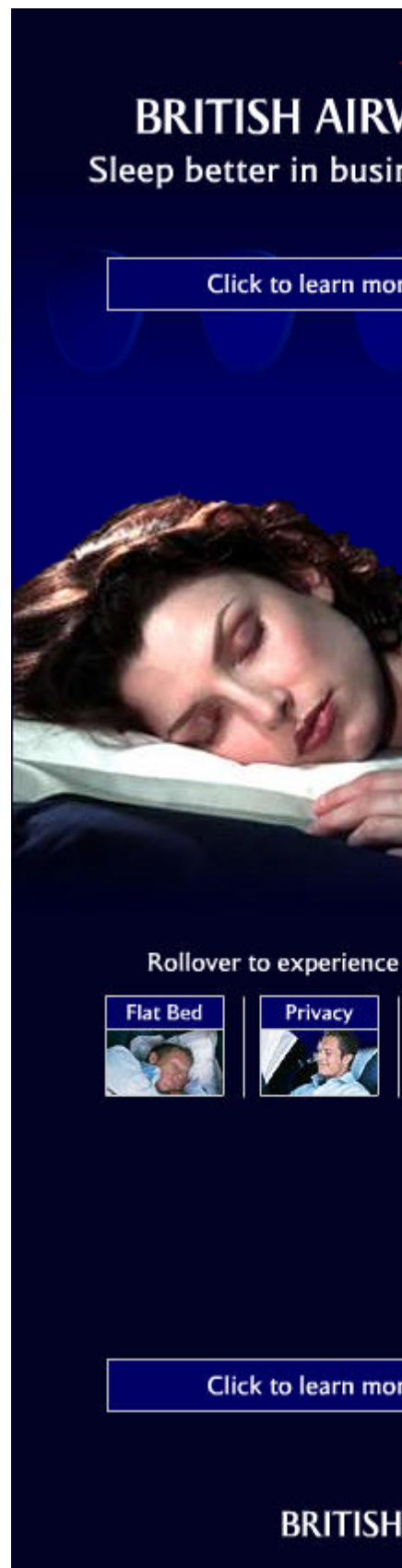
The law also limits the number of embryos that may be created in future fertility treatments and lets the central government decide what procedures may be used to thaw them.

Mr. de Santiago said the government was likely to choose procedures that were "more respectful of the incipient human life" so that "those cells condemned to die will die," leaving less tissue for scientists to salvage.

"We believe that the human embryo should be touched as little as possible and used only to create babies," he said. "It's more ethical, and more fruitful, to use stem cells from adults, which are already generating promising results."

Embryonic stem research has broad support, though, among several patients' associations, who welcomed the opening of the cell bank.



"You can't put up obstacles to research when you're talking about a possible solution to human suffering," said José Antonio Herrada, president of the Spanish Coalition of Citizens



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with Chronic Illnesses and the European Diabetics League. "For those who say an embryo is human life, wouldn't it be more coherent to use that life to save 100 others?"

The cell bank director, Ángel Concha, said the center would work first with so-called adult stem cells, obtained from bone marrow or umbilical cord tissue, until the central government's legal challenge was resolved. He hopes that will be soon.

"In this field, one month, six months, a year, is a lot of time," he said. "We can't sit here with our arms crossed. It's the difference between being a pioneer or a secondary player."



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