

Britain set for historic vote on 'three-parent' babies (Update 2)

February 2 2015

Britain could become the first country in the world Tuesday to allow the creation of babies with DNA from three people in a move that has divided Britons and pitted campaigners against religious leaders.

Lawmakers in parliament are set to vote on mitochondrial DNA donation techniques for in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) aimed at preventing serious inherited diseases being passed on from mother to son.

Under the proposed change to the laws on IVF, as well as receiving the usual "nuclear" DNA from its mother and father, the embryo would also include a small amount of healthy so-called mDNA from a woman donor.

"Today marks a historic day for the future of modern medicine as parliament debates whether the UK should become the first country to allow mitochondrial donation to be used in IVF treatment," Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England, wrote in the Daily Telegraph.

The change could apply to up to 2,500 women of reproductive age in Britain with hereditary mitochondrial diseases but opponents say it opens the way to the possibility of "designer babies" in future.

Mitochondrial DNA (mDNA) is passed through the mother and mitochondrial diseases cause symptoms ranging from poor vision to diabetes and muscle wasting.

Mitochondria are structures in cells which generate the energy that allows the human body to function.

Health officials estimate around 125 babies are born with the mutations in Britain every year.

'Glimmer of hope'

Members of parliament are to hold a debate starting at around 1600 GMT and then have a free vote on the issue, meaning they can vote according to their conscience and are not forced to stick to party lines.

The vote is expected to pass and the motion would then pass to the House of Lords, the upper chamber of parliament, for final approval later this month.

The law would allow Britain's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to authorise the procedure and a pioneering research centre in Newcastle is expected to be the first where it would take place.

The first babies with three parents could be born next year if MPs vote in favour of the change.

International charities in an open letter urged MPs to back the change, saying it "offers families the first glimmer of hope that they might be able to have a baby that will live without pain and suffering".

The charities, including groups from Australia, France, Germany, Spain and the United States said mitochondrial disease was "unimaginably cruel".

"It strips our children of the skills they have learned, inflicts pain that cannot be managed, and tires their organs one by one until their little

bodies cannot go on any more," the letter said.

'Destructive manipulation'

But many Britons are still against the proposed change despite years of consultation by health authorities with the public and the scientific community.

A poll by the ComRes market research agency in the run-up to the vote showed only 20 percent of respondents in favour of the change and 41 percent against, while 39 percent said they had no view either way or did not know.

Opponents include scientists and religious leaders.

David King, director of the watchdog group Human Genetics Alert, said: "If we want to avoid the nightmare designer baby future we must draw the line here."

Josephine Quintavalle from the pro-life organisation Comment on Reproductive Ethics said there should be more focus on finding cures "which do not rely on destructive manipulation of early human life".

The Roman Catholic Church is firmly opposed to the move, pointing out that it would involve the destruction of human embryos as part of the process.

The Church of England has also said that ethical concerns "have not been sufficiently explored".

There is also concern on purely scientific grounds.

Justin St John from the Centre for Genetic Diseases at Monash

University in Australia said the new IVF techniques required "further validation".

"It is essential to analyse offspring to determine that no abnormalities appear at least during early life," he said in a statement last week.

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