

'Three-parent babies are a gift, not playing God'

Cameron casts aside warnings and praises Commons vote to allow IVF technique

By Sarah Knapton, Science Editor

DAVID CAMERON denied that scientists were "playing God" as he voted to allow three-parent babies in a landmark decision in the Commons.

Yesterday Britain became the first country to allow a new IVF technique which uses genetic material from a "second mother" to repair faulty DNA.

Experts from across the world had warned that Britain would be making a "historic mistake" by amending the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 and said it could face a legal challenge in Europe.

But the Prime Minister, whose son Ivan suffered from cerebral palsy and epilepsy, said there was no danger that the procedure could lead to "designer babies".

'This is not an absolutely fundamental issue of designer babies, it's about dealing with a problem'

"I think this is going to give parents who want to have a healthy and happy baby the chance to have that baby," Mr Cameron told LBC radio, the first time he has spoken about the issue.

"As someone who has had the experience of having a severely disabled child I have every sympathy with those parents."

"This is something that can be done and something that I think, from all the research and evidence, it is not playing God with nature, this is much more like a kidney donation or a lung donation rather than some sort of fundamental change that is being made."

"Those arguing for the change point out that this is not an absolutely fundamental issue of designer babies, it's about dealing with a problem."

"It's not a huge number of parents, but those who are affected know that the

technology is there to allow them to have healthy children, so we need to make this change."

Yesterday MPs voted in favour of the law change by 382 to 128. The House of Lords will vote on the issue next month although it is unlikely to derail the amendment.

Jane Ellison, the health minister, said: "All reasonable and rigorous steps have been followed to reach this point. This is a bold step for Parliament to take but it is considered an informed step. For many families affected it is light at the end of a very dark tunnel."

About 2,500 women in Britain could benefit from the treatment, amounting to around 125 babies born each year.

MPs and scientists had argued that the science behind the procedure was unproven. "You are not curing somebody of something, you are creating someone different," said Jacob Rees Mogg, who voted against the amendment. "People have compared it to blood transfusions. That is simply wrong."

Fiona Bruce, the Tory MP, also said it represented genetic modification of babies: "Once the genie is out of the bottle, there will be no going back for society."

Dr Calum MacKellar, of the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics, warned that the change left Britain open to a "dangerous, brave new future" in which "further genetic alterations of human beings become inevitable".

However, charities and families with children suffering from mitochondrial disease welcomed the vote.

Robert Meadowcroft, the chief executive of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, said: "We have finally reached a milestone in giving women an invaluable choice, the choice to become a mother without fear of passing on a lifetime under the shadow of mitochondrial disease to their child."

Luciana Berger, the shadow health minister, told the Commons that the vote would "break a chain of misery" for thousands of families. The procedure, which was developed by British scien-



Life of suffering How mitochondrial disease left our son in need of constant care

Emma and Peter Smith, of Storrington in West Sussex, had never heard of mitochondrial DNA until 18 months ago, when their healthy nine-month-old baby son stopped eating, standing up and even breathing for himself.

The Smiths took Maxwell to accident and emergency where he was initially diagnosed with tonsillitis. But when his condition worsened, he was eventually diagnosed with mitochondrial disease. There are many forms of the condition, but in Maxwell's

case his mitochondrial DNA is not providing enough energy to power the cells in his body.

Doctors originally said that Maxwell would not survive beyond his first birthday, but he is now coming up to his third. Today, all he can manage unaided is to twitch the tips of two of his fingers, which is how he communicates with his parents.

Mr and Mrs Smith, who were forced to give up their jobs and sell their home to care for their son, said they were delighted with the Commons vote. "We

saw a geneticist last year while researching the condition. She told us that if we wanted to have another child we had just two options: either go for IVF, or get pregnant naturally and have a test at 11 weeks to decide whether to terminate the pregnancy if the child has the same problem," said Mrs Smith, a former financial controller.

Because there are so many forms of mitochondrial disease, parents face the prospect of having to lose their unborn child or take the risk that it will be

only mildly affected and continue the pregnancy.

Mrs Smith added: "Either way, you will be forced to go through the pain of bringing your child into the world, only to know you will one day lose it, regardless of how much love and care you have to give.

"Surely it's only natural for parents to be given the opportunity to bring a healthy child into the world rather than one condemned to a life of suffering?"

Sarah Knapton

tists, allows IVF clinics to replace an egg's defective mitochondrial DNA with healthy DNA from a female donor, to prevent children suffering debilitating conditions such as muscular dystrophy. It would result in babies having DNA from three people – and, effectively, two mothers.

Regardless of yesterday's vote, it will be up to the fertility regulator, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, to decide on a case-by-case basis whether treatment can go ahead. Mitochondrial

transfer will only be allowed when there is a "significant risk" of disability or serious illness.

Children born after mitochondrial transfer will not be entitled to discover the identity of the "third parent" donor.

The law will come into effect in October 2015. Human trials are then likely to begin at Newcastle University and the first babies could be born next autumn.

Doug Turnbull, professor of neurology at Newcastle University, who pioneered

the treatment, said: "This is an important hurdle in the development of this new IVF technique but we still have the debate in the House of Lords, and importantly the licensing by the HFEA. Finally, I think the quality of the debate shows what a robust scientific, ethical and legislative procedure we have in the UK for IVF treatments. This is something the UK should rightly be proud of."