

Three-parent babies by next year after Lords change the law

By Sarah Knapton, Science Editor

BRITAIN became the first country in the world to allow the creation of three-parent babies last night after the Lords approved a change in the law, despite concerns that children may be born sterile.

The first baby conceived after mitochondrial donation techniques may be born as early as next year after peers voted against a motion to block the change by 280 votes to 48, a majority of 232.

Lord Howe, the health minister, had urged the House to pass the amendment to the 2008 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act and permit an IVF technique intended to prevent serious inherited mitochondrial diseases including muscular dystrophy.

MPs, including all three main party leaders, voted earlier this month in the Commons to legalise the technique which uses genetic material from a "second mother" to mend faults in mitochondrial DNA.

But opponents including church leaders and pro-life groups have warned that the change is hasty and puts the country on a "slippery slope" towards designer babies and eugenics.

Yesterday Lord Deben called for a delay and asked peers to form a committee to look at the safety and legality of the procedure. He said that children born by the technique could be sterile and argued that the majority of the public did not agree with the procedure. "We have to

protect three sets of people, the families, the children and the wider society," he told the Lords. "We should be concerned about the children who would be born in these circumstances. There are real doubts about safety."

Baroness Scotland, a former attorney general, also said that the legislation had been rushed through and argued that neither Jeremy Wright, the current Attorney General, nor the Lord Chancellor supported it. Baroness Hollins, chairman of the British Medical Association's science committee also said she could not support the legislation.

But Lord Howe said the technique could "give real hope to families". "It would be cruel and perverse to deny them that opportunity for any longer than necessary," he added.

Lord Winston, a leading fertility expert, backed the law. "I don't believe that this technology threatens the fabric of our society in the slightest bit," he said.

The legislation will become law in October. The first babies could be born the following autumn. Newcastle University is already offering women £500 to become "second mothers" to three-parent babies.

MEPs have claimed that Britain will breach EU law and "violate human dignity" in allowing three-parent babies.

Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, has argued that changing the mitochondria is no different from swapping a faulty car battery. Separate DNA in the cell nucleus is responsible for most inherited characteristics.