

Fertility watchdog refuses to extend embryo time limit

Oliver Moody Science Correspondent

The 14-day time limit on growing human embryos in the laboratory will not be extended, the head of the fertility regulator has said.

Sally Cheshire, chairwoman of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, dismissed an increasingly vocal campaign by some scientists for the freedom to carry out experiments on embryos at a stage when their bodies are beginning to form.

Human embryos were first cultivated in laboratories nearly half a century ago. In 1984 Britain banned researchers from growing them for longer than two weeks. The limit was never tested until earlier this year, when a group of biologists led by Magdalena Zernicka-Goetz at the University of Cambridge showed they could keep embryos alive up to the legal boundary and possibly beyond.

The breakthrough has led several leading fertility scientists and cell biologists to call on the government to stretch the time window to 28 days.

They argue that studying this stage in human development is essential for finding new infertility treatments and ways to prevent miscarriages.

Critics say, however, that by the third and fourth weeks embryos are developing the first rudiments of their identity

and it would be unconscionable to use them in experiments.

Simon Fishel, the IVF pioneer, told a Progress Educational Trust conference in London yesterday that humans knew more about the growth of fruit flies than what happened to their own embryos. Professor Fishel said investigations of embryos could lead to new drugs against cancer.

Mrs Cheshire hinted, however, that there was no rush to change the law. She said that most research on embryos in Britain had stopped after five days.

"We need to be careful that we don't run before we can walk," she said. "We're still learning to walk."

Mrs Cheshire was echoing the views of Baroness Warnock, the crossbench peer whose report paved the way for the 14-day limit in the first place.

Lord Carey of Clifton, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who is often on the conservative end of the Church of England's views, suggested that Christians and other religious believers might accept a time extension for embryo research. He said that responsible experiments were driven by a "profound respect for the sanctity of life".

He said: "I simply cannot understand the mindset that believes there's an equivalence between an embryo and a full human life."

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