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Research on part-human, part-animal embryos permitted



Caroline Flint, Health Minister

A child's need for a father will no longer be a consideration when a woman seeks fertility treatment, ministers will say this week.

The move – which comes despite widespread public opposition and which will give single women and lesbians the right to treatment – is expected to form part of a shake-up of Britain's embryology laws.

One of the key proposals would allow research on test-tube embryos that were part-human, part-animal — referred to as "chimeras". The changes, which ministers say have "fundamental social, legal and ethical aspects", are set out in a Department of Health "command paper".

Homosexual couples will have the same parental rights as heterosexuals and, for the first time, all parents will be banned from choosing the sex of their baby for non-medical reasons. However, embryos will be able to be screened for genetic abnormalities "which may lead to serious medical conditions, disabilities or miscarriage".

Screening will also be expressly permitted to identify a "tissue match for a sibling suffering a life-threatening illness", but the document rules out "family balancing" and adds that most people surveyed in a consultation exercise believed "this should not be a matter of choice open to parents".

Human-cow embryo

The creation of combined human-animal embryos under licence will be popular among stem-cell researchers, including a team from the North East England Stem Cell Institute, which has submitted plans to create a human-cow chimera embryo. However, it will be bitterly contested by reproductive ethics campaigners who brand such ideas "abhorrent". The aim of the shake-up is to bring the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act into line with scientific advances.

Caroline Flint, the health minister, claims in her foreword: "The over-arching aim is to pursue the common good through a system broadly acceptable to society." However, the law obliging clinics to consider a child's "need for a father" is to be scrapped – despite backing from the public for the present system.

However, the need to take account of the "welfare of the child" before treatment is given will stay. Robert Whelan, the deputy director of Civitas, the institute for the study of civil society, criticised the plans to give single mothers the right to fertility treatment. "It is grossly irresponsible to deliberately bring a child into the world in circumstances which will leave it at a disadvantage," he said.

"The people who engage in this sort of activity see children as an accessory and something



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they can have as a right. The fact that the child will suffer is secondary.”
The government paper will set out the Government's plans ahead of a draft Bill next year.