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Advanced Cell Technology clones first human embryo

■ Although many object to the cloning of human cells, Dr. Michael West believes the technology will help patients

By Seth Borenstein
Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON (KRT) - A Massachusetts company said Sunday that it had for the first time cloned an early human embryo in an experiment intended to eventually produce matching cells for patients with a variety of diseases and for replacement of human organs.

But the scientific bombshell also raised the specter of cloning mature human beings and was denounced by politicians, specialists in the ethics of biological research, and supporters of the eventual use of cloning for therapeutic purposes.

Scientists envision cloning skin cells to create early versions of all-purpose type stem cells that could be changed into many types of organs. This type of research is touted as providing possible cures for Parkinson's Disease, diabetes and other degenerative conditions.

"We had one embryo that went to the six-cell stage," Dr. Michael West, president of Advanced Cell Technology in Worcester, Mass., said on NBC. "Our dream is that

someday we could take a patient's cell, skin cell, and give them back anything that they needed to cure disease."

West said he opposed cloning entire humans.

But bioethicist George Annas at the Boston University School of Public Health said cloning embryos at early stages comes close to opening that possibility. "There's no way to get around that," Annas said. "This is a step in that direction."

"It's a major step down that road," added Arthur Caplan, director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. "But whether that road leads anywhere, nobody knows."

Annas, who like Caplan supports stem cell research and even therapeutic cloning, said West's announcement would only hurt scientists who want to do that work, by raising opposition to it. Far more work has to be done first on turning stem cells into organs before scientists even have to worry about cloning embryos for this purpose, Annas said.

"I think it's irresponsible to do this," Annas said.

Last summer, in a move supported by the White House, the House of Representatives approved a measure that would

make it illegal to clone human embryos for research. The Senate is scheduled to take action on the bill next February. Bush administration officials say the West announcement Sunday strengthens their case against any types of human cloning and strict limits on stem cell research.

"The Senate has a busy calendar, but this shows why it's important for them to act," said White House spokeswoman Jennifer Millerwise. "The president has made it clear that he is opposed to any type of human cloning."

"I don't think we're going to let the cloning of human embryos go on," Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala., said on NBC.

The National Right to Life Committee denounced the move as cloning "human entities who would be killed in order to harvest their stem cells."

West called that reaction "wrong." He said the embryo in question is "far smaller than the head of a pin, with no body cells of any kind. In fact, the embryo hasn't even decided if it's going to become one person or two persons. It's that undifferentiated at that point."

Tony Pugh in Washington contributed to this report. © 2001, Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.

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Afghanistan

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The official did not expect the Marines or other U.S. ground troops to join anti-Taliban Afghan fighters in storming Kandahar itself if Taliban defenders there don't surrender. But that official also did not rule out the

possibility that American special forces might pursue some top Taliban leaders, either inside the city or attempting to escape from it.

Earlier Sunday at Mazar-e-Sharif, fewer than a hundred miles from Kunduz, foreign Taliban fighters rioted inside a camp with weapons smuggled inside and other weapons captured from guards. After a fierce battle that included U.S. air strikes on the prisoners, an estimated 300 Taliban were dead - virtually all of those who had taken up arms.

There were reports that U.S. personnel were inside the camp, but it was unclear whether there were American casualties. Eyewitnesses at the scene, including a Time magazine reporter and a television film crew from Germany, said at least one American may have died. U.S. military officials said there were no

soldiers killed or wounded.

Abdullah Abdullah, the foreign minister for the alliance, said Afghan Taliban fighters should be pardoned as they surrender, but foreign soldiers fighting for the Taliban should be treated as terrorists, and Taliban leaders such as Mullah Muhammad Omar should be tried for war crimes.

Omar remained at large as about 3,000 anti-Taliban soldiers moved toward two southern provinces near the regime's last significant holdout, the city of Kandahar. Bin Laden, the suspected terrorist leader, remained on the loose as well. There were conflicting reports on his whereabouts, but U.S. officials continued to express confidence he would be found.

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