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### Saudis take lead on stem-cell cloning

By Tim Friend, USA TODAY

Saudi Arabia is preparing to launch a stem cell research program that would include the kind of therapeutic cloning prohibited in the United States.

In so doing, Saudi Arabia will join a growing list of countries, including the United Kingdom, Sweden, Israel and China, that are establishing stem cell research centers with policies more liberal than those in this country.

With vast financial resources and a growing biotechnology infrastructure, the Saudis could become world leaders in developing medical treatments from stem cells. U.S. scientists and patient groups worry that it is yet another sign that the United States, with one of the most restrictive stem cell policies in the world, is losing its longstanding edge in biomedical research.

"When the science goes to other places, as it is now doing, Americans will be the last to benefit from any new breakthroughs," says Michael Manganiello, president of the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, which represents 75 patient groups, universities and medical organizations that back therapeutic cloning.

Therapeutic cloning involves taking a cell from a patient and joining it with a donor egg to create a blastocyst, or pre-embryo. The goal is to harvest stem cells from the blastocyst, which is destroyed in the process, and transplant them back into the patient to treat diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and diabetes and perhaps spinal cord injury. Theoretically, such cells would not be rejected by the patient's immune system.

The issue in the United States has pitted leading medical organizations, which support therapeutic cloning, against religious and conservative groups who oppose the use of human embryos for research. Some scientists also argue that stem cells taken from adult tissues will be as effective as cells generated by therapeutic cloning, without the need to destroy an embryo.

Saudi Arabia's decision to enter into therapeutic cloning research spotlights stark philosophical differences between the world's two major religions, which could affect who will benefit from future medical therapies for diseases that affect everyone.

U.S. stem cell research policy, based on the predominantly Catholic view that life begins at conception, forbids federally funded scientists from conducting therapeutic cloning. Since last August, the Bush administration has permitted scientists to work with human embryonic stem cells generated from a limited number of existing embryos donated from fertility clinics — a policy it says balances scientific needs with moral convictions.

"The president raised the budgets for stem cell research on both embryonic and adult stem cells," a Bush spokesman said. "We have made tremendous progress, and the president believes we can continue to realize progress while maintaining the highest ethical standards."

Islamic law, which governs 1 billion Muslims worldwide, views life as beginning at 120 days after conception, so researchers working at the new center in Saudi Arabia are not faced with the same moral conundrum.

Details of the new stem cell research center are expected to be announced in September, says Sultan Bahabri, head of King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center in Jeddah.

Hamad Al-Omar, a scientist and leader in developing Saudi Arabia's new biotechnology industry, says the stem cell research center should be operating within the year and will include an international staff of scientists.

Al-Omar is co-founder with Bahabri and other Saudis of Jeddah BioCity, a private venture that includes numerous state of the art biotechnology laboratories and companies currently under construction. Al-Omar says the project has substantial financing and is intended to make Saudi Arabia a world leader in biotechnology.

Al-Omar says Saudi Arabia already has a strong infrastructure for conducting embryonic stem cell research through its expertise with in vitro fertilization. IVF

techniques are similar to those required for therapeutic cloning. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest IVF birth rates in the world — about 4% of all births per year compared with about 1% in the United States.

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