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## Women given green light to donate eggs for cloning

WILLIAM TINNING

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Women in the UK are set to be given the go-ahead to donate eggs for cloning experiments that could enhance the treatment of a number of diseases, including diabetes and Parkinson's.

Under groundbreaking rules to be approved tomorrow, The Herald understands that scientists will be given permission to recruit donors who are not already receiving medical treatment in procedures that carry potential risks.

The decision by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) – the government's fertility watchdog – has renewed ethical controversy about therapeutic cloning because new donors will risk harming their health with no direct benefit to themselves.

Egg donation is critical in the development of cloning. However, it is widely recognised that its use can expose women to potential complications which can cause kidney damage, or even death.

Until now these hazards have meant that only patients already having In-Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) or other gynaecological operations have been allowed to donate eggs for research. The revised regulations will address a shortage of donated eggs that has affected efforts to produce cloned embryonic stem (ES) cells, and could speed up the search for new treatments.

Objectors argue that the move would put women at risk for the sake of speculative research.

Therapeutic cloning involves injecting the nucleus of an adult cell into an egg that has had its own DNA removed.

The resulting ES cells would be genetically identical to the patient who provided the adult cell, allowing them to be transplanted to treat disease without rejection.

Egg donation, however, can cause fertility problems, and requires women to take drugs to stimulate their ovaries.

This carries a risk of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, a complication that can, in rare cases, cause kidney damage and death.

The guidelines from the HFEA will allow women to choose to take on these risks for the common good of others.

Such donations are already approved for helping infertile couples to conceive but not for medical experiments.

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Women who donate eggs for any purpose can be paid a token £15 plus expenses, though the HFEA has proposed increasing this to £250.

The decision is expected to be confirmed by the HFEA tomorrow.

Embryo rights campaigners have been angered by the move.

However, independent ethicists argue that stringent safeguards attached to the revised guidelines should prevent exploitation.

The rules allow friends and family of scientists, or of patients with diseases that might potentially be treated using therapeutic cloning, to donate only after independent counselling to ensure they are acting voluntarily.

Clinicians responsible for collecting eggs and advising donors must not be involved in the research that will use the eggs.

The HFEA will also specifically ban one of the controversial practices that led to Woo Suk Hwang, the South Korean cloning pioneer, facing disgrace over faked research.

In July, the HFEA warned of strict checks and no question of "nodding through" any application to allow healthy women to donate eggs for cloning research.