

## After allowing stem cells, British MPs vote on abortion

British MPs were Tuesday voting on whether to cut the upper time-limit for abortions after overturning an attempt to ban cutting-edge medical research.

MPs Monday night defeated amendments seeking to ban hybrid human-animal embryos needed for medical research and the creation of so-called 'saviour siblings' - babies who are selected to provide genetic material for seriously ill relatives.

Hybrid embryos are seen as an important tool in scientists' efforts to develop treatments for cancer, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease.

Both Monday's and Tuesday's votes have pitted Catholics and conservatives against scientists and human rights campaigners in what has been termed an ethical debate.

The MPs, who have been allowed a free vote by their parties rather than being issued a party-line, will decide Tuesday whether to cut the upper time-limit for abortions from the current 24 weeks to 20 weeks.

The measure has been introduced by the opposition Conservative Party as an amendment to the government's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill.

Women's rights campaigners opposed to the amendment argue the issue is about protecting women's reproductive choices - the right to make decisions about their bodies - rather than whether or not a foetus can survive at the age of 20 weeks or less.

Health Minister Dawn Primarolo added: "There is no science that shows us that the survival rates have changed since we took the decision to have the time limit at 24 weeks (in 1990)."

But Conservative MP Nadine Dorries, who put forward the amendment to change the abortion laws, said: "If a baby feels pain as part of a barbaric abortion process - which is what happens post-20 weeks - and if we know that the baby could live if it was allowed to be born, then there comes the point when that baby has rights which are of equal parity to the mother's."

In the weeks leading up to the vote Dorries has been conducting a campaign that has been supported by the pro-Conservative Daily Telegraph and Daily Mail newspapers.

An estimated 200,000 women have abortions in England and Wales every year.

Both Monday's and Tuesday's amendments were tabled amid increasing attempts by Britain's Catholic Church to influence voting.

Top catholic priests have been actively campaigning in favour of the amendments, citing "ethical" grounds and directly appealing to Catholic MPs in what could be termed a religious rather than a 'conscience vote'.

Catholic cabinet ministers Ruth Kelly, Des Browne and Paul Murphy voted for a ban Monday, while Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Tory leader David Cameron both opposed it.

In a series of votes lasting nearly seven hours, amendments were defeated by a substantial majority.

*Dipankar De Sarkar ( © IANS / India eNews)*