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## UK consults on embryo law

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The British government today (August 16) **launched** a major consultation on the laws governing the technology and techniques used to assist human reproduction and embryo research.

The consultation will seek views on a host of topics, including the rules governing screening and selecting embryos for medical purposes, the definition of an embryo for research purposes, and the regulation of research into mitochondrial disease.

The consultation follows a government **commitment** in January 2004 to review and update the **Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act**, originally written in 1990. "The HFE Act was a landmark piece of legislation which has stood the test of time well," said Public Health Minister Caroline Flint in a statement. "However, we never expected that the act would remain forever unchanged in the face of major developments in science and medicine."

**Alison Murdoch**, head of the Newcastle Fertility Centre, agreed that the time for an overhaul of the legislation had come. "It is important that there is an act to regulate this area and give the public confidence in what scientists are doing," she told *The Scientist*. "But there are problems in some of the details in the current act because science has moved on so far. Our research has already been delayed because of this," she noted.

"The redrafting has got to allow sufficient flexibility so that when new developments come along we can progress with it," Murdoch added. The consultation will continue until November 25 this year.

The government also today published a response to a report from the **House of Commons Science & Technology Committee**, which made recommendations on many of the issues raised in the consultation.

Evan Harris, a member of the committee, said that the government's response on the regulation of science was largely positive. "The government broadly accepted most of the Select Committee's recommendations in this area and this will allow the law to catch up with science and allow patients the opportunity to benefit from new insights and treatments of diseases," he said in a statement.

Among the committee's 104 recommendations and conclusions were a suggestion that future legislative efforts resist the temptation to redefine what an embryo is, and rather focus on which forms of embryo are allowed for implantation, and which for research. The government's response agrees there may be merit in this approach.

The committee also recommended that a ban on altering the genetic structures of cells while they form part of an embryo be changed in the case of research into mitochondrial disease. The government again agreed with the committee that this research be allowed. "That would be great news for us," said Murdoch.

Robin Lovell-Badge, head of the developmental genetics division at the National Institute for Medical Research, agreed with Murdoch's view that the redrafted law should be flexible enough to account for foreseeable changes in science.

He added that he hoped the review would result in a more efficient process for regulating research.

"I've never had to apply to the HFEA for a license myself, but know from colleagues that while they believe there is a need for regulation, that it has often been a long, protracted process. There should definitely be a speeded up process that is more interactive," he told *The Scientist*.

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