

Dear Constituent,

Thank you for your interest regarding the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, which was voted on in the House of Commons a few weeks ago.

Firstly I would like to thank you for sharing your views with me on this piece of legislation. The complexity of the scientific and moral issues involved meant that I have spent a lot of time reading and listening to representations from constituents, faith groups, and medical bodies. I also undertook an email consultation to my panel of over 600 constituents, asking what support there was for the proposals to update the law on embryonic stem cell research, and 61% were in favour.

The decisions have not been easy ones to make; in fact I think it has been the most challenging set of votes I have experienced, in terms of deciding which way to vote. Many of my fellow MPs have told me they feel the same, as we have all grappled with the responsibility of setting the framework on these important ethical issues.

I feel strongly that whatever decisions I take in the House of Commons have to be in line with my own conscience, and if that conflicts with the party line then my conscience wins every time; it would be miserable to vote against what I truly believe. In any case, there was a free vote for all Liberal Democrat MPs on this so there was no party line. Other parties also had free votes with the exception of Labour MPs who had a free vote on parts of the Bill and were whipped on other parts of it.

Below I set out in detail how I voted on each division and my reasoning for doing so, and I also list the number of votes for and against.

### **Monday 12<sup>th</sup> May – Second Reading**

The Second Reading stage discusses the Bill in general terms. Much of the Bill is not controversial, so I voted for the Second Reading which enabled the Bill to progress to the Committee stage where the controversial issues could be looked at in detail.

The Second Reading was passed by 340 votes to 78.

### **Monday 12<sup>th</sup> May - Programme Motion**

The Programme Motion allocated the time for the debate on the controversial areas of the Bill. It allocated 3 hours for Clause 4 (human-admixed embryos) , 3 hours for Clause 11 and Schedule 2 (saviour siblings), 3 hours for Clauses 14 and 23 (the "need for a father" issue) and 3 hours for all the new clauses relating to abortion. These issues all merit proper and thorough debate; as I felt that 3 hours each was not nearly enough, I voted against this timetable. Indeed it turned out that many aspects were not discussed in any detail due to these restrictive time limits imposed by the Government. The timetable was passed by 265 votes to 149.

### **Monday 19<sup>th</sup> May – Human Admixed Embryos**

While I respect the position of many of my constituents who take an absolute position against any kind of embryo research or IVF, my starting point is different. I do support IVF treatment for infertility, and believe that it is better for unused embryos to be used for research to benefit humankind than to be discarded. My decisions therefore have been about how to balance the ethics of having a duty to relieve suffering through seeking future medical treatments, with the ethics of how we should treat early embryos.

Where possible, I believe we should pursue research with adult stem cells or cord blood stem cells, and have supported a motion in Parliament (Early Day Motion 969) to improve the collection of cord blood for this purpose. However many scientists believe the special properties of embryonic stem cells, which can be grown into any type of cell, mean they hold particular potential for successful research into treatments for a variety of diseases and conditions. Adult stem cells have been used in research for fifty years, whereas embryonic stem cells have only been used in research since 2003, so their potential has not yet been fully explored.

The main issue discussed in this part of the debate was how the use of animal cells in embryonic research should be regulated – so-called human admixed embryos. Looking into this issue it became clear to me that there is a severe shortage of human eggs for research purposes, as it is a painful and difficult process to take eggs from women.

One solution is to use cybrids, where an animal egg has its nucleus and DNA removed, and human DNA is then inserted into the "empty"

cell, which can then be studied. There are strict safeguards in place for all of the research in this part of the Bill – none of the embryos can be grown past 14 days, at which time it is still a tiny group of cells that could fit on the head of a pin. None of the embryos can ever be implanted in a womb. Licences will only be issued to permit the research if a scientific need is demonstrated and the same research cannot be carried out in any other way. For these reasons I voted against the amendment to ban all of this research involving human admixed embryos.

The amendment was defeated by 336 votes to 176.

There was also an amendment to ban “true hybrids”, which are where an animal egg is fertilised with human sperm or a human egg is fertilised with animal sperm. This is currently permitted in very restricted circumstances, where human sperm can be tested for fertility on hamster eggs, with the proviso that it is not allowed to develop past the 2 cell stage, and this would continue to be allowed under the amendment. There was no compelling case put for creating “true hybrids” for any other purpose, and I felt very uncomfortable about the concept of allowing these to be created for some future potential purpose, without us knowing what that is. I therefore voted for the amendment to ban true hybrids.

The amendment was defeated by 286 votes to 223.

Finally, there was a probing amendment to prohibit genetic modification of embryos in research. The proposer of this amendment conceded that what he really wanted was reassurance from Government that this would be restricted to research. This is subject to the same 14 day safeguard, and given this is one avenue to explore further genetic disorders which cause great misery I voted against this amendment.

The amendment was defeated by 314 votes to 181.

### **Monday 19<sup>th</sup> May – “Saviour Siblings”**

The issue of saviour siblings involves parents who have a child with a condition that requires treatment with bone marrow or umbilical cord blood from a matched tissue type. In cases where there is no existing match in the family, on donor registers or cord blood banks, the Bill proposes that on a case-by-case basis parents who wish to have another child can apply for a licence to go through IVF and screen the embryos to ensure the child is a match for their sibling. This is already permitted in special circumstances and has been licensed for 6 families

so far. Indeed the constituency MP for one of these families made a moving contribution to the debate in favour of allowing saviour siblings.

It is hard to imagine the intensity of the agony felt by parents whose child has a condition that means they will die in childhood or experience great suffering throughout their life. I can only think that in such a situation I would want to do anything I could to save the life of my child. The choice to have another child that would also be loved as the individual they are, but who might also save their sibling, is an understandable one. Of course such parents are currently able to try for another child in the hope that they will be a match, but to me it seems that if science can ensure a match this is the humane thing to do. In each situation it will be up to the individual parents to decide, and I think the choice is best made by those facing the situation, so I voted against the amendment to ban "saviour siblings". The amendment was defeated by 342 votes to 163.

There was an amendment to change slightly the conditions under which saviour siblings were allowed. The practical difference between the two different wordings was negligible and I voted against this amendment to leave the decision to those assessing each case. The amendment was defeated by 318 votes to 149.

The final amendment was to insert a condition that any tissue permitted to be taken from the saviour sibling must be regenerative. Although the best interests of the saviour sibling would be paramount and the donation of whole organs would be banned under the legislation anyway, I felt this amendment provided tighter restriction on what tissue could be taken from the saviour sibling and so I supported it. The amendment was defeated by 293 votes to 200.

## **Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> May – "need for a father"**

The 1990 legislation regulating IVF treatment contained the requirement for the need for a father to be considered. However, society's attitudes on equality issues have moved on considerably since 1990, with civil partnerships being permitted and many gay couples becoming parents through adopting. The Human Rights Act has also come into effect since then and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. In most clinics therefore, they now

comply with the legislation and do not allow the need for a father provision to be used as an excuse to refuse fertility treatment to lesbian couples or indeed to single women. However there are examples where this has not happened and some clinics have refused treatment to lesbians or single women.

To clarify the position, the new wording is "the need for supportive parenting", which emphasises the needs of the child to have loving parenting, without discriminating on the basis of the gender. The evidence strongly shows that children of single-sex couples do just as well as those with a mother and a father.

I believe fatherhood is very important and we should encourage fathers to play an active role in their children's upbringing, but this should not be used to justify discrimination where the needs of the child for supportive parenting are being met. For these reasons I voted against the amendment to return to the original wording of "need for a father".

The amendment was defeated by 292 to 217.

A similar amendment was tabled suggesting changing the words to "the need for a father or a male role model". The need for supportive parenting covers the requirements of meeting the best interests of the child without inserting these extra words, and so for the same reasons as the first amendment I voted against this one.

The amendment was defeated by 290 votes to 222.

## **Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> May – Abortion**

No one is pro-abortion. It is a horrible procedure and deciding to have a termination is not one that any woman takes lightly. I want to see the number of abortions greatly reduced, and have been a vocal campaigner for better education to give young people the information and confidence to make their own decisions about their sexual activity. Too many young people are pressurised into having sex before they are ready, often ending up in unwanted pregnancies. In particular, I think sex education should always include relationship education, placing sex in the context of a loving partnership and exploring the emotional aspects of the decision to have sex, rather than treating it as purely physical.

Some people are opposed to abortion in all circumstances, and while I respect that position I take a different view, and accept that in some

cases abortion should be permitted. That leaves me having to decide where the lines should be drawn. The current time limit is set at 24 weeks, which was reduced from 28 weeks in 1990 in the light of a great deal of scientific research that showed increased viability of foetuses between 24 and 28 weeks. More recent evidence shows further improvements in viability of foetuses between 24 and 26 weeks, but no significant change in the viability under 24 weeks. I therefore supported no change to the current time limit, and voted against the amendments to reduce it.

The amendments to reduce the time limit were all defeated:  
Reduction to 12 weeks was defeated by 393 votes to 71.  
Reduction to 16 weeks was defeated by 387 votes to 84.  
Reduction to 20 weeks was defeated by 332 votes to 190.  
Reduction to 22 weeks was defeated by 304 votes to 233.

There was also an amendment about the provision of information when scans show physical or mental abnormalities. I very much agreed with the spirit of this amendment as clearly information and support should be available to pregnant women in this situation to ensure they understand fully all their options. I voted against the amendment however because the way it was drafted it was ambiguous whether counselling would be compulsory.  
The amendment was defeated by 309 votes to 173.

One issue which we were unfortunately unable to debate fully or change the Government's mind on, was the creation of a standing Bio-Ethics Committee. This was recommended by the House of Commons Science & Technology Select Committee, and I think would be a great aid to future decision-making in this area, particularly since science moves so quickly.

I hope you will understand that while I welcomed the views and comments from constituents, on matters of conscience such as this MPs ultimately have to use their own judgement and come to their own conclusions. In my position you may have voted differently on some or all of these issues. Nonetheless I hope this letter has helped to explain my thinking for voting the way I did, and that you will understand that I considered the issues very carefully before I came to these conclusions.