

Embryo transfer could help save rhinos

TOM ODULA
Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya — A rhinoceros was impregnated through embryo transfer in the first successful use of a method that conservationists said might later make it possible to save the nearly extinct northern white rhino subspecies.

In testing with another subspecies, the researchers created a southern white rhino embryo in a lab from an egg and sperm that had been previously collected from other rhinos and transferred it into a southern white rhino surrogate mother at the Ol-Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya.

“The successful embryo transfer and pregnancy are a proof of concept and allow (researchers) to now safely move to the transfer of northern white rhino embryos — a cornerstone in the mission to save the northern white rhino from extinction,” the group said in a statement Wednesday.

However, the team only learned of the pregnancy after the surrogate mother died of a bacterial infection in November 2023. The rhino was infected when spores from the clostridium strain were released from the soil by floodwater, and the embryo was discovered during a post-mortem examination.

Still, scientists are very optimistic about their findings.

“Now we have the clear evidence that an embryo that is frozen, thawed, produced in a test tube can produce new life and that is what



KHALIL SENOSI, ASSOCIATED PRESS

The last two remaining northern white rhinos Fatu, left, and Najin, above-center, feed on hay with southern white rhino Tauwo, right, on May 1, 2020, at the Ol Pejeta conservancy in Kenya.

we want for the northern white rhino,” said Professor Thomas Hildebrandt, the lead researcher and the head of the Department of Reproduction at BioRescue.

About 20,000 southern white

rhinos remain in Africa. That subspecies as well as another species, the black rhino, are bouncing back from significant reduction in their populations due to poaching for their horns.

However, the northern white rhinoceros subspecies has only two known members left in the world.

Najin, a 34-year-old, and her 23-year-old offspring, Fatu, are both incapable of natural repro-

duction, according to the Ol-Pejeta Conservancy where they live.

The last male white rhino, Sudan, was 45 when he was euthanized in 2018 due to age-related complications. He was Najin’s sire.

Bill

From A1

decision that affirmed the conviction of an Eastern Iowa high school teacher who exchanged intimate Facebook messages and repeatedly hugged one of his underage students both at and away from school.

Bradley Wickes, a former social studies teacher at Camanche High School, challenged the District Court findings that his hugs with a student constituted “sexual conduct” under Iowa Code. He also argued prosecutors failed to provide sufficient evidence to show he engaged in a pattern, practice or scheme of conduct to engage in sexual conduct with a student.

“It is important to note that nothing should prohibit teachers from hugging students for reassurance, comfort, or in congratulation without putting themselves at risk of being charged with the crime of

sexual exploitation,” then-Justice Bruce Zager wrote in the court’s opinion.

But Wickes’ behavior “went far beyond a teacher trying to comfort and reassure a struggling student,” the court wrote.

The justices agreed with prosecutors and the lower court that the more than 600 pages of Facebook messages between Wickes and the student became flirtatious and sexual in nature and showed that the hugs the two exchanged were for the purpose of Wickes’ sexual gratification.

To determine whether Wickes engaged in “grooming,” justices wrote it required examining the actions of the teacher “in light of all of the circumstances to determine if the conduct at issue was sexual and done for the purposes of arousing or satisfying the sexual desires” of the teacher or the student.

Nathan Arnold, a lobbyist representing Professional Educators of

Iowa, said schools have to remain “vigilant” in spotting and reporting abuse and misconduct, but raised concerns the bill “creates a presumption of guilt.”

Arnold read incidents he said have been listed by attorneys hired by school districts as grooming behavior by teachers. They included asking a student how many siblings they had and emailing students outside school hours.

While the problem identified by the Department of Education “is very real,” Arnold said the difficulty is using the word “grooming.”

“Except in very specific criminal context, (it) doesn’t really work as a legal term with any real definition or meaning,” he said. “... It is more of an internet smear than it is a workable legal standard.”

Arnold said the bill would have a “chilling effect” on teachers forming connections with their students “if there’s some sort of a stigma about meeting with a student.”

Another grooming bill advances

Lawmakers on a Judiciary subcommittee advanced a separate bill Wednesday that defined grooming as a crime in Iowa law and created penalties for violating the law.

The bill, House Study Bill 575, defines grooming as using the internet, written communications or in-person interactions to “seduce, solicit, lure, or entice,” a child, child’s guardian or a person believed to be a child to commit a sex act.

Although lawmakers advanced the bill, members of the three-person subcommittee said they had a number of questions about why the bill was proposed and how it was worded.

Rep. Phil Thompson, R-Boone, said he’d like to speak with county attorneys about the necessity of the bill before moving it further along in the lawmaking process.

Looking for ‘common ground’

House Study Bill 568 passed the Education subcommittee on a 2-0 vote.

Rep. Sharon Steckman, D-Mason City, declined to sign off on the bill, wanting to see language of the proposed amendment by the Iowa Association of School Boards.

Reps. Bill Gustoff, R-Des Moines, and Brooke Boden, R-Indianola, said they agree with aim of the bill and voted to advance it to continue discussion.

Boden said school districts have asked for more detailed guidelines, and she believes the bill will help the Board of Educational Examiners “make better decisions and maybe expedite the process as well.”

“I agree that there’s maybe some (alternative) language we can look at here to find common ground,” she said.

Treatment

From A1

the bill is an extension of that policy.

“No medical practitioner should be forced to participate in a procedure or medication to which he or she has an objection of conscience, or violate their oath to do no harm,” he said.

Opponents, though, said the bill could endanger patients and elevates the interest of providers over the health and needs of patients.

They said the effects would be particularly dire in Iowa, where rural populations face a severe lack of access to quality health care. Iowa is ranked among the worst states in the nation for access to maternal health care.

“I have not once seen a health care worker forced to do something they don’t want to do,” said Francesca Turner, an OB-GYN at

Broadlawns Medical Center in Des Moines. “Pharmacists refusing prescriptions and doctors denying care, especially in rural Iowa, will only exacerbate the already dire health care crisis in our state.”

A growing number of states have adopted similar laws, sometimes called “medical refusal bills.” Lawmakers in Florida and Montana both passed similar laws last year. Iowa lawmakers have also considered similar provisions in past years, but they have not been signed into law.

Mazie Stilwell, a lobbyist for Planned Parenthood Advocates of Iowa, said the proposed bill is “more extreme” than what has been put forward in the past and mirrors what other states have put in place.

“There is no original thought in this bill,” she told lawmakers on Wednesday. “What we have seen is that this is a culmination of all of these extreme provisions that

we’ve seen shopped across the country all put into one bill.”

Protections from discrimination, First-Amendment retaliation

Existing state law already allows doctors to refuse to perform abortions based on their religious belief or moral convictions. The bill would add to those protections and require providers to offer prior written consent before being asked to perform or assist in an abortion.

Medical institutions and practitioners would be protected from discrimination based on their refusal. Practitioners could not be denied privileges or public benefits based on their decision to opt out.

Providers would receive whistleblower protections from retaliations if they report a facility for violating the conscience objection law.

The bill would also protect

doctors and other providers from being punished or having their license revoked by a state entity based on First Amendment protected speech, unless that speech directly harmed a patient.

Senator: Disagreements over ‘do no harm’

The bill was advanced by a three-person Senate subcommittee on Wednesday. Republican Sens. Jason Schultz of Schleswig and Jeff Taylor of Sioux Center voted to advance the bill, while Democratic Sen. Janet Petersen of Des Moines voted against it.

Taylor said he had heard from medical students in past years who were concerned they would be pressured to perform procedures during their training they have a moral objection to. He invoked the Hippocratic Oath and said the bill would protect providers who do not want to perform procedures

they think would harm patients.

“The whole idea of, first, do no harm — We don’t always agree on what harm is,” he said. “Harm versus health, two medical professionals who have been well-educated and have lots of years of experience may see those in diametrically opposed ways.”

Petersen said she had not heard from any physician who said they had been pressured to perform a procedure against their moral beliefs. She said the bill would further strain health care for women.

“I think this bill is trying to fix something that is not broken,” she said. “I have yet to see a single example come forward. I also have an extreme level of concern about the number of bills that we continue to see going after Iowa’s access to health care.”

After passing the subcommittee, the bill is now eligible for a vote in the full Senate Judiciary Committee.

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