

Human Life is God's Creation, Not Our Commodity



Destruction of Embryos for Stem Cells, Cloning, Designer Babies...where next?

Recently Australians have been debating a matter of life and death: should we allow the destruction of 'surplus' IVF embryos presently stored in lab freezers around Australia, and the creation and destruction of new human embryos by cloning or other means, to get 'stem-cells' for medical experiments?

Some scientists think that if they are allowed to do this, all sorts of cures may be possible; others are not so sure, and suggest that there are other, better ways to go with our research. Many of our political leaders and commentators have taken the view if the promised results are good enough, scientists should be free to kill embryos; others think we should be giving the lead in 'ethical best practice' rather than caving in to threats and pragmatism.

tiny human beings. He offers two arguments for this. First, embryos lack the capacities which earn us respect (brain, consciousness, preferences, ability to love and plan...): they have not yet achieved enough to matter. Secondly, they are 'surplus', unwanted, left-overs.

Which capacities—and whether capacities—make us intrinsically worthy of respect is philosophically controversial: Singer's test for personhood would exclude not just embryos, but the unborn, newborn and severely handicapped. Catholics believe that every human life is precious, from conception till natural death, whatever their capacities, and do not exclude anyone from their list of who deserves our love and respect. Many people of other religions and even some of no religion agree: after all, every embryo is someone's child; no woman

Only humans have that 'special something'

Many religious and civic leaders in our country, have spoken out strongly in defence of the tiniest, most vulnerable human beings. They have argued that ransacking tiny human beings while they are still alive is a serious harm; that this will undermine reverence for human life; and that it will be divisive of our community.

There are, they point out, better ways of obtaining stem-cells (from adults and placenta) that harm no-one and actually cure; we should be focusing research energies in these more promising alternatives.

But there are many counter-voices in our society today. Peter Singer argued in the Age (29/03/02) that we should not treat early human beings as bodily lab animals. He thinks animals are more valuable than

grieving a miscarriage thinks her lost child was worth less than a lab rat or was 'an ideal laboratory tool', as Singer claims.

History recounts many shameful stories of exclusion of people who were said to 'lack the requisite capacities', 'less than fully human' and 'unworthy of our respect': slaves, blacks, women, Jews, the handicapped, gypsies... The concern of the Churches to be inclusive, to recognize the claims of each and every human being to our protection and compassion, is surely Christianity at its best.

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Stem Cell Reality Check: The Facts

"Embryonic stem cells have not helped a single human patient. By contrast, adult stem cells and other ethically acceptable alternatives have helped thousands of patients, and new clinical uses expand almost weekly."

Fact #1

Myth: "Embryonic stem cells are the most effective for treating disease"

Reality: Actually, they're not. Embryonic stem cells have not helped a single human patient or demonstrated any therapeutic benefit. Any claim that they may someday do so is guesswork. In fact they will probably be immune-rejected and uncontrollable. By contrast, adult stem cells and other ethically acceptable alternatives have already helped thousands of patients, and new clinical uses expand almost weekly.

Last year the US National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine sponsored a workshop in Washington DC on Stem Cells and the Future of Regenerative Medicine. Experts testified that:

"There is no evidence of therapeutic benefit from embryonic stem cells."

— Marcus Grompe, MD, PhD, Department of Molecular and Medical Genetics, Oregon Health Sciences University (an expert in cell transplantation to repair damaged livers)

"There is no experience with embryonic stem cells in humans, and very little in mice... all claims of therapeutic benefit from embryonic stem cells are conjectural."

— Bert Vogelstein, Professor of Oncology and Pathology at Johns Hopkins University and Chairman of the Institute of Medicine's committee studying stem cell research

"It's bloody nonsense that stem cells might be able to cure Alzheimer's. We don't even know what causes it."

— Dr Peter Rathjen, Head of Molecular Biosciences at the University of Adelaide, *Weekend Australian* 29-30 June 2002

Current Clinical Use of Adult Stem Cells to Help Human Patients

Cancers

lymphomas, multiple myeloma, leukemias, breast cancer, neuroblastoma, renal carcinoma, ovarian cancer

Autoimmune diseases

multiple sclerosis, systemic lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, scleroderma, scleromyxedema, Crohn's disease

Anaemias

including sickle cell anemia

Immunodeficiencies

including first successful human gene therapy

Bone and cartilage deformities

children with osteogenesis imperfecta

Corneal Scarring

generation of new corneas to restore sight

Stroke

neural cell implants in clinical trials

Repairing cardiac tissue after stroke

bone marrow or muscle stem cells from patients

Parkinson's disease

patients treated with own neural stem cells or retinal stem cell

Growth of new blood vessels

preventing gangrene

Skin

grafts, growth from hair follicle stem cells

For details and citations for all these uses of ADULT stem cells, see <http://www.stemcellresearch.org>

Fact #2

"Most people support stem cell research"

Of course they do—but what type of stem cell research do they support? Stem cells that come from adult tissue, placentas, or umbilical cord blood can be retrieved without harming the donor. The only way to obtain embryonic stem cells, however, is to kill the living human embryo. Typically, poll questions do not make this distinction.

When Americans are asked if the government should fund stem cell research which requires destroying human embryos, 70% say "NO." And when choosing between funding stem cell research including embryonic stem cells vs. stem cell research without embryonic stem cells, they support the latter approach 67% to 18%. Are Australians so different?

Let's promote promising medical research that everyone can live with...

"Stem cell research" refers to research using stem cells that come from embryos or other sources, such as adult tissue, placentas, or umbilical cord blood. The only way to obtain embryonic stem cells, however, is to kill the living human embryo. The embryos killed for their stem cells are about a week old and have grown to about 200 cells.

Fact #3

Myth: "Excess IVF embryos are going to be discarded anyway"

Reality: Not necessarily. Most embryos in storage are actually transferred to their mothers. A few are donated to other couples. But the others should never be thought of as mere "left-overs" that can be used up in experiments. They are tiny human beings.

Just because someone is "going to die soon anyway" is no excuse for taking parts from them and killing them in the process. It is unethical to kill even dying people, even if we think we can benefit from doing so.

What's more, we now know that the scientists want to be allowed to create new human embryos solely to destroy them for stem cells. So much for the "discarded anyway" argument.

But what scientists or parents might do with the embryos is not the issue. The issue is: Should the government allow (and use taxpayers' money for) research which requires destroying human embryos? And why are so many "excess" embryos being created in the first place?

Fact #4

Myth: "Human embryos aren't really human beings yet"

Reality: The testimony of modern science is clear on this point: "At the moment the sperm cell of the human male meets the ovum of the female and the union results in a fertilized ovum (zygote), a new individual human life has begun."

— Brookes & Zietman's *Clinical Embryology* 1998, Hamilton & Mossman's *Human Embryology*, Anderson et al's *Mosby's Medical, Nursing & Allied Health Dictionary* 2002, Taber's *Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, Arey's, *Developmental Anatomy*, Thompson, *Black's Medical Dictionary*, Carlson, Patten's *Foundations of Embryology* 1996, Moore & Persuad's *Clinically Oriented Embryology*, Sadler & Langman's *Medical Embryology*, O'Rahilly & Muller's *Human Embryology & Teratology*, Moore's *Essentials of Human Embryology*, Sweeney's *Basic Concepts in Embryology*.

The issue is not therefore whether human life is present, but how society ought to treat it. Human embryos deserve special respect as a form of human life, the first page of someone's life story.

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But there are other ways of doing stem cell research. We can use adult tissue, placentas, or umbilical cord blood. They are much more likely to work. And it would be ethical.

THE CLONING OF THE CLOWN

As little Mister Curly lay sleeping in the hay
A most ambitious scientist did steal his D.N.A.
And in a dark laboratory, from microscopic shreds,
A band of little men were made with curls upon their heads.
When Mister Curly woke in fright to see that he'd been cloned
He cried, "You've plagiarised my soul" and hung his head and groaned.
"You tragic fool; your cleverness shall be your fatal weakness;
You steal from God when you do steal a living thing's uniqueness."



Prayer for Life

God, Creator of Life, we pray that our nation will be united in respect for every human person, from the moment of their conception until their natural death. In your plan for our salvation, help us find therapies and cures for disease in ways that respect the dignity of every human person. Lover of Life, be with us in our suffering and in our joys, and help us build a civilization of truth and love.

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Many secular philosophies agree: what makes humans worthy of respect—never proper targets of lethal experimentation for advantage to others—is not passing the entrance test for the elite ‘persons only’ club. Rather, it is because they are one of us, our kith and kin, our brothers and sisters.

However affectionately some people feel towards their pets, they know that animals can never grow up to be believers or non-believers, philosophers or bishops, geneticists or whatever. Animals lack the inherent nature, organization, ‘soul’ as Christians call it. The only beings that have that special something are human beings, and they have it from conception until death.

But, say the pragmatists, human or not, these embryos are unwanted and so should be used. History is terribly scarred by stories of people being declared the unwanted. How often has one group decided another is not only ‘less than human’ but also ‘surplus’? And if surplus, then usable and disposable.

This debate is not about religion versus science. Christianity is the friend of science and has always been at the forefront of medical research. After all, the Church is the oldest and largest healthcare provider in the world. The father of modern genetics, Gregor Mendel, was a monk. Catholic medical research institutes, hospitals and professionals around the world are working night and day to find the best ways of helping the sick and the suffering.

But if saving or improving lives is the goal of medical research, does that justify doing anything and everything? Are there to be any ethical limits? For more than 2,000 years a defining principle of medicine has been *primum non nocere*, first do no harm. The World Medical Association’s modern Hippocratic Oath puts it: “I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the moment of conception”.

Additional Information is available from:

Respect Life Office www.health.thechurch.com.au, *Australian Bioethics Information* www.australasianbioethics.org, *Coalition of Americans for Research Ethics* www.stemcellresearch.org/index.html, *Americans to Ban Cloning* www.cloninginformation.org, *United States Conferences of Catholic Bishops* www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/bioethic/factsheets.html, *Pontifical Academy for Life* www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdlife/, *Southern Cross Bioethics* www.bio-ethics.com, *Australian Catholic Bishops Conference* www.catholic.org.au/statements/medicalethics.html#ETHICS, *Linacre Centre* www.linacre.org, W.E. May, *Bioethics and the Gift of Life*, 2000, L. Kass & J. Wilson, *The Ethics of Human Cloning*, 1998, T. Iglesias, *The Dignity of the Individual*, 2001.

The common justification for destroying embryos is saving others’ lives. But as we read elsewhere in this pamphlet, embryonic stem cells have helped no-one. And given that any cell-lines taken from them will be immune-rejected and uncontrollable, it is unlikely they ever will. Non-embryonic sources of stem-cells are much more likely to work. Indeed they are already working. In the last few months there have been dozens of reports of successes using stem-cells taken from sick people’s own bodies. No embryos need ever be killed to achieve such cures.

Pope John Paul II has repeatedly called upon us to stand up for the weakest and most defenceless human beings—including those just recently conceived, unseen, unloved, forgotten in lab freezers. The mass production of embryos in IVF programmes is, as he has

long suggested, just one more sign of the wrongness of creating human life outside of love-making in marriage. The latest proposals here in Australia, to dismember surplus IVF embryos for their stem-cells, to clone other human beings also for parts, to allow IVF and artificial insemination to be used for

singles and same-sex couples, to create children to be used for their bone marrow for other children, to manufacture designer babies... all these things represent “a commodification of children”, treating them as products of a human manufacturing process rather than gifts entrusted to us by a loving Creator God.

Let’s pray for our scientists and our political leaders, that our nation will be one where every human being is respected and nurtured and no human life is ever treated as expendable. Let us rededicate ourselves to taking the Gospel of Life to those around us.

