

Are we ready for cloning?

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In the past fortnight two private members bills have been presented to the Federal parliament, paving the way for experimentation on embryos. These Bills open the way for the creation of cloned human embryos, allow for the creation of embryos with more than two genetic parents, and even permit the creation of human-animal embryos (hybrids). It is almost certain that one of these bills will be debated by the Federal Senate prior to their end of business for the year (1st week in November 2006). Many of the relaxations that are being suggested are the same as those that in 2002 were debated and unanimously rejected by the parliament.

The current debate is mind-numbingly complex, full of inaccessible technical science and untestable claims. On the one hand we are told that so-called ‘therapeutic cloning’ and subsequent stem cell research holds the promise of cures for many debilitating and even fatal diseases. On the other side we have the conscious destruction of human embryos, the issues of ‘reproductive’ cloning (which is no different to ‘therapeutic’ cloning), and the potential for the exploitation of women (particularly with pressure to supply the eggs needed for such research and techniques.). All these are problematic for us as a society.

We must recognise that these issues are complicated and difficult and tread carefully, seeking understanding before making changes. The burden weighs heavily upon those deliberating on our behalf. How do we wade through this complexity of the science and the debate? Here are four broad questions relating to the proposed bills which are at the heart of the matter.

- **Are we ready to create human embryos solely for the purpose of destroying them for research?**

An embryo is an embryo no matter how it is made—whether by natural conception, by IVF, or by cloning (often called ‘somatic cell nuclear transfer’ or SCNT; but cloning by any other name is still cloning). Each of these living embryos will, if allowed, result in a live birth. These are all human beings with potential, and worthy of protection.

Would we ever want to create people to destroy them? Even if we gain medical advances, is this not too high a price to pay? If it is not, where does it end? We may perhaps grow cloned embryos to three months or six months so we can harvest organs, and this suggestion is not scare mongering but has been made in reputable medical-science research journals.

Those now proposing these measures (scientists and politicians alike) need to satisfactorily answer these concerns. Many of these people assured us in the 2002 debate that the practises now proposes were not ‘morally permissible’ or were ‘wrong’. What has changed since then?

- **Are we ready to create human clones?**

If cloning was clearly ‘wrong’ in 2002, when the Federal government unanimously banned cloning in all forms, what might have made it ‘right’ in 2006? There has been no significant changes in the science, and when polls are done in such a way as to give people all the information required, nothing has changed in public negativity towards ‘creating human life in order to destroy it’.

Sometimes a false distinction is made between ‘therapeutic’ and ‘reproductive’ cloning, where the only distinction is the intention for these ‘embryos’—whether they will be destroyed or allowed to live. But all such cloning will create a living human embryo. The technology and techniques needed for the early stages of reproductive cloning, are identical to what is now being proposed as ‘therapeutic cloning’.

It is hard to believe that the dominant pragmatic approach drive the current debate, will not eventually result in someone taking the next step up the reproductive cloning mountain: we climb it ‘because it is there’. Again, this suggestion is not scare mongering. There are those who have already made it clear that they intend to engage in reproductive cloning.

- **Are we able to protect women as the technology emerges?**

The production of embryos for research (by whatever means—natural, IVF, or cloning) requires human eggs, and lots of them. Are we ready for the potential commercialisation of women’s ovaries with the need to harvest many hundreds of eggs? The other alternative to this that is proposed, is the use of other animal eggs to produce hybridised human-animal embryos.

- **How realistic are the promises of those pushing for the changes?**

Four years ago we were given a lot of promises about medical advances arrived from embryonic stem cell research. People were given hope for themselves and those they loved, but it has come to very little. Of course the retort will be made that the researchers needs more time, and more freedom and good will come. But some of the past claims have just been patently false and disingenuous. For instance among the diseases we were told could be eliminated by embryonic stem cell research was Alzheimer’s disease—however world experts have said that Alzheimer’s disease is not a kind of disease that will ever be cured by stem cells. Such over-optimistic claims, along with the high profile cases of fraud and misreporting in the embryonic stem cell field, must give us cause to doubt how realistic are the promises of those pushing for change. Do they really have good reason to think that these diseases will be cured or are there other less noble reasons for pushing forward with this destructive use of embryos?

Science and embryology can tell us all sorts of information about the embryo, this previously ‘secret’ member of society. Medical practitioners can proclaim all manner of potential cures that can result from using the amazing potential from embryos. However what science cannot do, and what is not happening in the public debate, is to ask and answer more fundamental questions. Who or what is this thing we call the embryo? Is it a cellular extension, a little clump of cells that has no more significance than a flake of skin (apart from its potential)? Or is it a new human individual, full of life and possibilities, worthy of respect, love, and the protection of others? This is not a simple debate with simple answers from the Bible, but nevertheless there is good reason (Biblical, scientific, and philosophical) to understand the embryo as a human individual of some kind. This crucial understanding changes the debate about embryos and cloning from a matter of what will best help others who are sick, to a debate about what sort of society we want to be. Will we value the smallest members of the human family? Will we use each other for our own gain? Will the strong and the influential always dictate what is right and wrong? Will we ask ‘who is my neighbour?’ and having recognised them, even when others would walk by on the other side or ignore them as nothing, will we stoop down and give them respect and protection?

But what can I do?

If you do anything, it has to be **within the next ten days in order to be of any use:**

- Find out more at www.cloning.org.au
- Sign up to a general petition against these proposed changes at www.makeastand.org.au
- Or even better write to Federal senators assigned to your state (<http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/senators/index.htm>). Write a letter (not just an email) directly to them, as each Bill will be allowed a conscience vote. Our politicians will decide from their own views and their understanding of the sentiments of the electorate. The Christian voice should be heard on issues of life and death and the protection of the most vulnerable in our society.

We live in a beautiful but broken world, a world that by God's good grace we are able to examine, to use and manipulate. The more we see and understand, the more complex it seems. The more we can do, the greater the demands on us to be wise and discerning. Modern science has conquered many realms and now our bodies have become the latest area of exploration, and manipulation, with the promise of great personal gains for ourselves and those we love. What was considered science fiction only a matter of years ago is no longer fantasy but reality. We are now assured that diseases that were considered incurable, are only a matter of years away from a cure. The embryonic members of our society, which used to be hidden away in secret, with those first moments and months of life inaccessible, have now become public property- the source of debate, confusion, of hope and despair.

As we examine the embryo and the possibilities it seems to hold out, are we ready to make the monumental choices before us as individuals and as a society as we consider the best and wisest way ahead? When assessing the promises and panacea of medical research, is it possible to see beyond ourselves and consider humanity as a whole wherever it is found? As a nation the time for discernment is upon us.

*Andrew Ford & Tracy Nodder,
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

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