AMA Approves Creating Life for Destructive Purposes

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The American Medical Association (AMA)--the largest professional organization of medical doctors in the United States--announced in late June its support for human cloning for research purposes.¹ The AMA's house of delegates also passed a resolution containing guidelines for physicians who themselves wish to harvest stem cells from cloned human embryos for the purpose of medical research.² This formal decision places the nation's largest medical association in the camp of those who believe it is acceptable to create life for the specific purpose of destroying it for the benefit of others.

Research (or "therapeutic") cloning is performed in the same way as "reproductive" cloning--by creating a human embryo though the transfer of DNA from a body cell into an unfertilized egg. In reproductive cloning, the cloned embryo would be implanted in a woman with the hope that it would develop into a full-term, healthy infant. In therapeutic cloning, the cloned embryo is created precisely and solely so that it may be destroyed to obtain stem cells for research purposes.

The critical ethical issue here is whether cloned human embryos are unique human beings--with inherent human dignity and therefore worthy of protection--or whether they are, as some have asserted, merely microscopic globs of cellular material. We must ask ourselves if embryos are human beings deserving of protection. Are they human persons?³ Even if cloned embryos were shown for genetic reasons to be incapable of full human development, does this give us moral sanction to create--and then destroy--them to serve our own ends? I believe that the answer to this question is no. As Dr. David Stevens, the Executive Director of the Christian Medical & Dental Association, recently observed, "Adult human beings are the result of continuous growth that begins at fertilization. There is no morally relevant break in their development. Personhood does not depend on having abilities such as the power to reason, self-awareness, a certain level of intellect or consciousness. These capabilities may be latent due to the fault of certain
There are many stumbling blocks that may tempt us to regard cloned (and non-cloned) human embryos as less than full human beings. First, viewing embryos as somehow diminished in status may allow us to reap the alleged benefits of embryonic stem cell research. Human beings are capable of convincing themselves that countless illusions are true if it seems in their best interest to do so. When you combine this tendency to rationalize our choices with the growing trend toward utilitarianism in contemporary culture, the result is that "what we want" or "what seems to produce the greatest good for the greatest number" becomes the ethical yardstick by which to measure our actions--placing our culture on a very dangerous path. Looking only at results to determine right and wrong leaves no place for principles such as justice, sanctity of human life, or individual rights. It becomes acceptable in some circumstances to use people as means to an end--instead of ends in themselves--thus undermining individual rights.

If the pattern laid out above is fair and accurate, we would expect to see tragic historical examples demonstrating the danger of devaluing human life so as to benefit a particular society. More specifically, these examples would be marked by a redefining of what it means to be human--allowing some humans to be treated as less than human--in order to benefit others. Unfortunately, examples of this type are overwhelmingly numerous. I will here provide a few for the sake of illustration.

First, the American Indian was once viewed as a subhuman savage, a characterization that allowed our ancestors to exploit, and almost exterminate, them as a people. Also, before slavery could be sanctioned, it was necessary to view African-Americans not as human beings, but as property to be bought and sold. Scientific experimentation has also resulted in dark moments where groups of people were exploited and used as means in order to fulfill the goals and desires of others. The infamous Tuskegee syphilis study, for which the U.S. government has officially apologized, tracked African-American men with syphilis until their death, denying them available treatment in order to study the natural progression of their disease. A final example is the secret exposure of U. S. citizens to radiation during the 1950's as a means of studying the effects of radiation on human health.

In each of the above instances, it seemed to many at the time that the benefits gained by these endeavors would more than offset the intentionally inflicted human suffering and death. People often justified their acts by appealing to compassion, claiming to have been working toward the overall human good. Although compassion is a wonderful virtue, it alone never justifies an act as moral. Compassion should indeed accompany every encounter that physicians have with patients, but it is not a reliable guide to making right and wrong moral choices.

The AMA recommendation is doubly disappointing in that research cloning may be scientifically unnecessary as well as unethical. A steady stream of scientific publications suggests that clinically promising stem cells can be obtained from multiple organs and tissues in children and adults, including pancreas, fat, bone marrow, and even brain. Importantly, such stem cells can be derived without sacrificing embryos. The discovery in adults of "ultimate stem cells" that can change into all adult tissues was recently reported in the prestigious scientific journal Nature. A growing number of reports regarding adult stem cell research are providing increasing hope for individuals suffering from a wide variety of conditions including stroke, heart disease, Parkinson's
disease, spinal cord injuries, and immunodeficiency syndromes. Conversely, early reports of therapeutic trials involving embryonic stem cells have revealed serious problems, including uncontrolled cellular multiplication, undesired differentiation into tissues not needed by the patient, and the potential for fatal malignancies.

Given the above, why would anyone advocate using scarce financial resources on embryonic stem cell research rather than on non-embryonic stem cell research? The latter would seem to be the prudent course, even if no ethical issues were involved. One reason may be that scientists have invested their reputations based on their predictions that a multitude of suffering people could be healed by this technology. They have hitched their wagon to the star of embryonic stem cell research and are unwilling to concede that it would likely be more beneficial to focus on non-embryonic stem cell research.

Scientific hubris may also serve to in part explain the continued push for embryonic stem cell research. Our society has traditionally placed physicians and scientists on a pedestal, regarding them as the last best hope for allowing human beings to live pain-free, utopian lives. This type of deference usually breeds arrogance, which is evident in the case of embryonic stem cell research. Many research scientists have come to expect to be allowed to pursue their own holy grail without supervision or restraint. This "right" will not be surrendered gracefully, regardless of the cost in human life.

Dr. Michael Goldrich, chairman of the AMA’s Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs that wrote the research cloning resolution, asserted that this decision should be regarded as "a stance for science." This almost seems to be a way of saying that science can provide all the answers to our questions about existence, but this is, by definition, untrue. Science is indeed a powerful method that helps uncover the workings of the natural world, and this makes it a very valuable technique. However, science can only discover what is, not what ought to be. It can tell us what we can do, not what we should do.

In an attempt to aid this misguided quest for relief of human suffering and the overall good of society, the AMA has now given American physicians permission to destroy life deemed to be unworthy of life. Their decision to treat human beings in the early stages of development as tools to achieve social ends will foster the continuing devaluation of human life, producing tragic results. There is a real danger that we as Christians will try by default to leave these decisions to scientists, thereby forfeiting any opportunity we may have to use wisdom and prudence to exert control over proliferating biotechnical innovations. We must recognize, however, that this technology will prove to be a human "good" only if we are able to use it in ways that protect human life and enhance human dignity.


10 Multiple scientific references documenting both research and clinical advances in "adult" stem cell research may be accessed at http://www.stemcellresearch.org.


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