Human Cloning Is Here

Post Date: 11/25/2001
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Cloning
Reproductive Ethics

On Sunday, November 25, 2001, Advanced Cell Technology (ACT) in Worcester, Massachusetts announced that it had produced several human embryos through cloning. The cloning technique involved the transfer of nuclear material from an existing person to donated human egg cells whose nuclear material had been removed. All of the embryos died before growing beyond the six-cell stage.

That they died so early was not a surprise. Cloning often does not work in animals, and there has not yet been a single published report of successful nuclear transfer cloning in primates. So there is far less reason to expect that it would work in human beings. Even had the human embryos lived longer, they would have intentionally been killed when their stem cells were removed.

Such intentions are acknowledged in ACT's published report on the research in the online Journal of Regenerative Medicine (Volume 2, November 26, 2001, www.liebertpub.com/ebi/ebiopaper1.pdf). ACT's stated policy is that "no embryo created by means of nuclear transfer technology may be maintained beyond 14 days of development." In CNN's published interview with ACT President Michael West (www.cnn.com), West suggests that those pursuing the end of fully developed human clones are misguided and "need some reins put on them."

The idea here is that embryonic "therapeutic cloning," as the ACT report terms it, be allowed now--but that "reproductive cloning" to produce full-grown human beings not be allowed now. This approach is seriously flawed for many reasons explained at length in The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity's paper "Human Cloning: The Necessity of a Comprehensive Ban."

Among the flaws are the following.

First, the very term "therapeutic cloning" is dangerous. "Therapeutic" research is that which has the potential to benefit the research subject, whereas non-therapeutic research is intended to
benefit others. In "therapeutic" cloning, the subject of the research is the embryo, who is necessarily destroyed. The term "therapeutic cloning" is a misnomer, since destruction is hardly beneficial. Although the ACT research guidelines themselves acknowledge that risks to human subjects must be "minimized," they are not minimized here for the primary subjects, the embryos.

Manipulating terms is usually a sign that people are trying to evade an ethical responsibility. Such is the case here, and this is the second serious problem, respecting the humanity of the embryos. We all began as embryos. Of course, part of what makes up our body at various stages of development was once food, chemicals, sperm, egg, and other materials. The entity that is you or me did not come into existence until our unique genetic code became active within an embryo, directing our development. Being attached to a woman's uterus made no difference in that starting point--it just gave us the support we needed to keep developing.

Third, to prohibit reproductive cloning but to allow non-reproductive cloning is to establish a requirement to destroy all cloned embryonic human beings before birth--even to punish those who refuse to do so. Such a requirement goes beyond allowing killing, to requiring it. While unethical, such a requirement is also directly opposed to the legal positions of many national governments, including the long-standing U.S. Congressional prohibition against funding for any research that significantly harms human embryos. Required killing is also unenforceable.

Fourth, ACT's research goes beyond using already-existing embryos originally intended for other purposes: It produces human embryos with the intention of manipulating and discarding them. Many people, including the U.S. National Bioethics Advisory Commission, have opposed the creation and subsequent destruction of clonal embryos for research purposes, and for good reason. It reduces human life to a "thing" to be manipulated in any way people wish--a raw material for manufacturing products that people want. It is dehumanizing in the extreme.

Fifth, since so many people consider the intentional production of human embryos for destruction to be so offensive, many will reject any treatments developed from stem cells derived from clonal embryos. The tragedy here is that all people could benefit from the wonderful benefits of stem cell research if adult stem cells were the exclusive focus of research instead. Such cells can be obtained without loss of human life, and have already successfully been used, for example, to treat brain tumors, fatal blood disorders, and autoimmune diseases.

Finally, it is not only predictable but ethically appropriate that many people should reject clonal embryonic stem cell research, because of its primary rationale. A core ethical flaw in ACT's justification for the human cloning research is the claim that since so much medical benefit will likely result, the research must surely be justified. This utilitarian claim that "the ends justify the means" has marked the darkest episodes in medical research history. Utilitarian research--often with good intentions--focuses simply on the potential benefits, and doesn't take seriously the question of the human price paid in the process. However, benefits are not an automatic justification. We have learned that the hard way. May we not have to repeat our mistakes.

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