Imagine hearing the following financial news; "Today, the market in sow bellies is down, soybeans are stable, and the market in human embryos is up." Recent developments in embryonic research have moved us one step closer to that scenario.

The Jones Institute for Reproductive Medicine in Virginia announced last week that they intentionally created human embryos from donor eggs and sperm with the sole purpose of conducting destructive research on nascent humans. The twelve egg donors were paid $1500 to $2000 each, about what the average egg donor receives. The sperm donors were paid about $50 each. So, that means that the money earned from the destruction of human offspring can pay a month’s house mortgage for a woman and dinner for two for a man.

In a second case, Massachusetts-based company Advanced Cell Technology (ACT) admitted it was attempting to clone human embryos for the purposes of harvesting stem cells from those embryos. ACT is a privately-funded, for-profit biotechnology industry leader. Associated Press biotechnology writer Paul Elias broke the story on Friday, July 13th, that the Jones Institute, ACT, and Geron Inc., a Menlo Park, California, biotechnology company are racing to develop large numbers of embryonic stem cells to supply a market they hope will open up as soon as President Bush makes up his mind about federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.

Elias claims that "Geron buys leftover frozen embryos from fertility clinics and cracks them open to obtain the stem cells."

A market in human beings is not a future possibility, it is a present reality. What these companies are doing can only be described as human embryo farming: producing human embryos for a biotechnological research harvest. Only, instead of "farming," we really ought to call it "pharming"
since what they hope to do is to be the first to make a claim on a pharmaceutical treatment that will earn huge profits. Of course the morning "pharm report" won't be announcing that the market in embryos is gaining strength—that would be too traumatic for most Americans. Instead, ACT's ethics committee suggests that a human embryo cloned for research purposes should be called an "activated egg" or "ovasome."

What they call their "crop" or "product" is a very important marketing decision. The fertility drug Pergonal, for instance, would not likely be as popular if it were called what it is, "Derivative of Urine." Market share will not rise as high if their product's name is off-putting or offensive. "Ovasome" sounds like a breakfast drink to be mixed with milk. "I'll just have 'Ovasome'," you can imagine Dad saying as he comes down the stairs in the morning.

Make no mistake about it, this is not silly, it's dangerous. Human beings and their body parts are being bought and sold, created and destroyed, planted and harvested, for profit or potential profit. Human beings and their parts have become commodities, like sow bellies, corn and soybeans.

In their recent book, *Body Bazaar: The Market for Human Tissues in the Biotechnology Age*, Lori Andrews and Dorothy Nelkin argue that the value of human body tissue in the biotechnology age—and the potential for profitable patents derived from it—encourages doctors and researchers to think about people differently... Body parts are extracted like a mineral, harvested like a crop, or mined like a resource."

Do we really want to view human embryos as either farms or pharms, especially when the harvesting requires the destruction of the embryo? It's one thing to use umbilical cords retrieved after the birth of a baby for research, it's another thing to remove the baby's life-giving tissues for potential profitable pharmaceuticals. Yet the "pharmers" at Jones Institute, ACT and Geron are encouraging us to commodify tiny humans. These nascent human beings are being imperiled by our own biotechnological avarice. "Biotechnological uses," say Andrews and Nelkin, "risk running roughshod over social values and personal beliefs." Indeed.

Americans should repudiate the commodification of human embryos. They are not crops to be harvested. They are not "pharms" to be cultivated. After all, hard as it is to believe, you and I were once tiny human embryos. Didn't we have a right not to be bought and sold at the "pharmers market?"

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