



Beware the push for human cloning

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We should not allow scientists to tinker with the very essence of human life, writes Brian Harradine.

On Wednesday, former US president Ronald Reagan's son, Ron Reagan, addressed the Democratic national convention in Boston to argue for human cloning. He didn't use the word "cloning" once - it doesn't poll well in the US. But that's exactly what he described in his speech.

The US Democrats appear to be testing the ground for formal support for human cloning. The same push for cloning is also happening in Australia.

The Australian Parliament prohibited human cloning two years ago, but it also provided for a review of the legislation. It is this review that Australian cloning advocates hope will allow them to further tinker with the essence of human life.

Some lobbyists for research cloning claim they are against human cloning. But read the small print. They are against cloning human embryos to produce a live baby - but they support cloning embryos to be destroyed for experiments.

I believe most people would agree that human cloning for reproduction is wrong. A cloned embryo would be produced as a means to other people's ends. It has no parents in the ordinary sense of the word. The person supplying the genetic material would be more like a twin than a parent, leading to identity problems for the child. Without clear family relationships, it is unclear who would be responsible for looking after the child.

Cloning would put scientists in the role of manufacturers, while people who were cloned would be reduced to the status of products or commodities.

Human embryos are cloned in exactly the same way, whether they are to be used for experimentation or for reproduction. The only difference is that embryos cloned for research are intended to be destroyed instead of implanted in a woman and allowed to grow to term.

Cloning used to be the stuff of fiction. Not any more. It is a growing threat to the dignity of human life.

Allowing research cloning would foster the development of skills and techniques for cloning for reproduction. If it is accepted that it is fine to clone and destroy human embryos for experimentation, then it is a small step to reproductive cloning for medical reasons, then to reproductive cloning for any reason. Any serious attempt to ban human cloning should ban it both for research and for reproduction.

Professor Ian Wilmut, the pioneer best known for cloning Dolly the sheep, has already signalled early moves to argue for reproductive cloning. Earlier this year he told the New Scientist magazine: "I do envisage that producing cloned babies would be desirable under certain circumstances, such as preventing genetic disease."

Beware the push for human cloning - <http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/beware-the-push-for-human-cloning/2004/07/30/1091080436519.html#>

Professor Alan Trounson is the most influential Australian pushing for research cloning. He is founder of the National Stem Cell Centre - which has been promised about \$100 million of Federal Government funds.

More than half the \$100 million was awarded earlier this year. When I asked the Government to explain this funding, I found that the normal funding selection procedures had not been followed. The Government had not evaluated the centre, no funding committee had recommended the grant be more than doubled, and the Government refused to provide evidence of the centre's achievements that might justify this funding.

When I called for accountability for public funds, four state premiers intervened to stop me getting any details. That's how influential Trounson is.

Trounson earlier this year travelled to the United Nations in New York to speak at a conference against banning human cloning for experimentation. He argued that cloning for research could assist with finding cures to life-threatening diseases.

Human cloning lobbyists present the debate as a necessary conflict between whether we accept the research cloning of human embryos, or harm adults who might possibly be cured by this research. Their misleading characterisation of the debate encourages us to discard concern for embryonic human life.

But there are already adult stem cell cures that do not have any of the ethical problems of cloning and destroying human embryos. No cures have resulted so far from embryonic stem cell research and there are serious doubts they will - whether the embryos are cloned or not.

Human cloning would also contravene a number of international human rights declarations, including the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, which states that "the creation of human embryos for research purposes is prohibited".

Ron Reagan, Ian Wilmut and Alan Trounson are part of a lobby pursuing an incremental approach to human embryo research and cloning. Human embryo research has begun, human cloning for research is the next goal, and human cloning for manufacturing babies will be only a short step after that.

Cloning used to be the stuff of fiction. Not any more. It is a growing threat to the dignity of human life. Both the Howard Government and the Latham Opposition should commit to a permanent and comprehensive ban.

Brian Harradine is an independent senator for Tasmania.

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