

## **The Canberra Times**

### **Whatever the cloning lobby says, it's still a human embryo**

By Brian Harradine

Thursday, 26 May 2005

L AST week's human cloning breakthrough also came with a breakthrough in semantics. According to Korean researchers, the human embryos they cloned weren't really embryos. They were "nuclear transfer constructs".

The researchers tried to sweep away ethical concerns by renaming the cloned embryo. It was a nice try. Perhaps the public would be fooled by this impenetrable language and think that nothing of concern had taken place.

But it's not the first time for such semantic games. Professor of medical genetics at the University of Melbourne Bob Williamson tried a similar gambit at a conference in Canberra earlier this month. He argued that "there is no justification for regarding stem cells created by nuclear transfer as clones, far less 'embryos'." But of course you don't clone stem cells. You clone human embryos and then destroy them by extracting their stem cells.

And there was an attempt some years ago to introduce the term "pre-embryo", which is said to be an embryo less than two weeks old. It was a term created for political rather than scientific purposes, so that it could be argued pre-embryos should somehow be less valued. The cloning debate is plagued by dodgy definitions. Research cloning lobbyists like Williamson often claim they are against human cloning. What they really mean is they are against cloning to produce a live baby, not against human cloning for research. But human embryos are cloned using the same method, whether they are later used for research or reproduction. It is the decisions made after they are cloned that determine what they're used for.

The United Nations has seen the clear danger of human cloning. Two months ago the UN declaration on human cloning called for a ban on all cloning - whether for research or for reproduction.

The Korean research used a cloning method called "somatic cell nuclear transfer", where the nucleus or genetic material of a human egg cell is removed and replaced by the nucleus of a cell from the person who is to be cloned. The new cell is then chemically stimulated to grow into an embryo. South Korean scientists at the Seoul National University detailed how they managed to extract stem cells from cloned human embryos. They were the first to clone a human embryo last year. The Korean team is now able to produce more embryonic stem cell lines using fewer eggs and embryos. They claim their procedure was more efficient partly because they used fresh eggs from young, fertile women.

The source of eggs for human cloning is a cause for concern. Will women giving ova to cloning programs do so of their own free will, or will there be subtle pressures?

The journal Nature reported that one of the PhD students on the South Korean team that produced the first cloned embryo last year said she had donated ova to the program, but later retracted her statement. It is easy to see how a PhD student might feel obliged to show her commitment to a research project and provide eggs for cloning.

Whatever the cloning lobby says, it's still a human embryo -

[http://canberra.yourguide.com.au/detail.asp?class=your%20say&subclass=general&category=opinion&story\\_id=396556&y=2005&m=5](http://canberra.yourguide.com.au/detail.asp?class=your%20say&subclass=general&category=opinion&story_id=396556&y=2005&m=5)

Donors who are related to people with conditions they hope will benefit from embryonic stem cell research are also vulnerable to influence. The language of cures used in reports of this research and the misleading term "therapeutic cloning" might suggest these cloned human embryos are to be used for cures. In reality, these embryos have been cloned for research, as no cures are available.

Commenting on the Korean research, bioethicists from Stanford University warned "women who undergo ovarian stimulation to procure oocytes experience severe ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, which can cause pain, and occasionally leads to hospitalization, renal failure, potential future infertility, and even death."

They also questioned whether it is ethical to ask women to donate their eggs for no personal health gain. Normally it would be an obligation of doctors to advise against a risky operation for no benefit.

The pro-cloning research industry has a big incentive to convince people that it is not really mucking around with human embryos. The general public isn't comfortable with that. So the next step is to say that the result isn't really a human embryo. Embryonic stem cell research is a multi- million dollar business. The Federal Government alone has committed over \$100 million to the Australian Stem Cell Centre.

If scientists can convince the public they're going to do research that doesn't really involve human embryos, they can avoid ethical controversy and potentially access even more money. Later this year an Australian committee will be appointed to review Australia's ban on human cloning.

It will have to carefully chart its way through attempts to muddy the waters and the pressure of big biotech business, so that the Australian public can be fully informed.

Next month I retire after 30 years in the Senate - 20 years ago I introduced a private members bill into Parliament to prohibit experimentation on IVF embryos and to prohibit the creation of human embryos for experimentation. One of my greatest regrets is the bill wasn't given time for debate.

Dehumanising experiments on human embryos cheapen the value of life and mean other marginalised groups are at greater threat of their human rights being abused.

Brian Harradine is an independent

senator for Tasmania