

Why I changed my mind about stem cell research.

I was a member of the Lockhart review of stem cell legislation. At the outset of the review, I had negative views about stem cell research. This was largely because, like many doctors, I had seen patients who were expecting stem cells to cure their devastating disease, and had to explain that this was not going to be the case. As a scientist I thought that stem cell transplantation had many problems and was unlikely to be very useful in neurological disease. Furthermore, as a conservative person, I had the view that there are some actions that doctors should not do, and creating and destroying embryos for the sake of research was one such action.

During the course of the review I came to change my mind. It became very clear that Australians hold a wide range of views about stem cell research. All the people who were interviewed by the committee appeared to be good and well-meaning people. The main point of difference between groups was the degree of protection that should be afforded to embryos that were produced in the laboratory. Some people thought that these in embryos deserved as much protection as a person, whereas others did not. There appeared to be no way of reconciling these views, with both sides of the argument agreeing to differ.

However, it must be appreciated that this is more than just a theological or a moral disagreement. Until I joined the Lockhart review, I had not fully appreciated that embryo research outside the guidelines is a crime, punishable by imprisonment, and subject to policing by a special regulatory authority. This is a moral disagreement where the force of the law is being used to uphold one view of what is right. This made me uncomfortable. I found that I did not want the laws of my country to be used to compel moral values that were not widely supported.

It is difficult to think of a good analogy, given that some people think that destruction of embryos is equivalent to murder. However, some people oppose blood transfusion and organ transplantation, and I tried to imagine what would happen if those treatments were made to be illegal. This would cause uproar. It seemed to me better that those who were opposed to these procedures should opt out, while allowing the procedures to be legal. This does not mean that we should not have laws based on morality, but rather that such laws must be generally agreed upon.

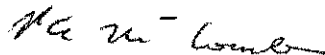
The next thing that struck me was that the destruction of human embryos is already accepted by the community, as is the use of surplus embryos for research. The destruction of embryos is an inevitable consequence of assisted reproduction technology, where as many embryos as possible are created, to maximize the chance of pregnancy. The only way to prevent such destruction would be to prevent IVF or to compel women to have all embryos implanted. The use of surplus IVF embryos for research has been widely accepted by the community, although some people still oppose this strongly.

Then, when considering the destruction and use for research of embryos formed by cloning, it is clear that end result is the same, whether the embryo is originally formed as a clone or as an embryo for fertility treatment. The committee heard the view that the destruction of an embryo that was created for research purposes is worse than the destruction of embryos that were created for reproductive purposes, but it is difficult to sustain that distinction.

In considering the status of embryos formed in the laboratory, I realized that embryos that are formed in the laboratory have no chance of development unless implanted in a uterus. If nature is allowed to take its course, the embryos that are created in the laboratory will die. Therefore, the embryos that are formed in laboratories are outside of our usual experience of the formation of new life, and exist in an entirely artificial situation. In the same way that seeds will not grow into mature plants unless implanted in the soil, these embryos will not grow into mature human beings unless brought to term in a mother. This is different from the potential of an embryo of the same age that has been formed in the body of a woman, and that will develop naturally without further action being taken.

There was a strong argument that embryo research and therapeutic cloning should be rejected because these techniques were not going to work. On reflection, I came to the view that this is a bad argument. Taken to its logical conclusion, this argument could mean that if cures were certain, then the research should be supported. However, this is not true — if the research techniques were wrong, then finding a cure would not justify doing something that was wrong. Thus the arguments about the use of embryos for research must be framed in terms of morality.

My conclusion was that those people who think that there is no moral problem with embryo research should be allowed to carry out this research, and should not be prevented from doing so by the power of the law. Those people who think this research is wrong should be allowed to say so, and to protest against what they believe to be wrong, and those who do not wish to participate in treatments that arise from stem cell research should be allowed to avoid such treatments.



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