

TODAY'S EUGENICS – CULLING THE DISABLED BEFORE BIRTH

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During lectures at medical school, two austere looking men in academic regalia gazed down on us from portraits on the lecture theatre wall. I used to wonder who they might have been and what wonderful contributions they must have made to the field of medicine. One of the two, Professor Richard Berry, had a science building named after him as well. It was quite by accident that I found out about Professor Berry, and I could hardly believe my eyes as I read the following words:

“On 3 April, 1925, Professor Richard Berry, then Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Melbourne, gave a lecture in the anatomy school lecture theatre to the University Science Club, on the subject of ‘feeble-mindedness’. ...Berry’s message, that sub-normal members of society were spreading their inferior genetic material, needed no hard selling at the University of Melbourne Science Club in 1925. The meeting was so well attended that there was standing room only..... On the topic of race deterioration and the threat of the feeble-minded...Berry filled the largest halls in every capital city of Australia with enthusiastic and supportive audiences. A national tour...was intended to raise support for a raft of policy initiatives of eugenic tone designed to purify and improve the Australian race. His success in popularizing his views and the almost uncritical acceptance of eugenics as cutting edge science is now undisputed.

...By the mid-1930s he was advocating not only the sterilization of the ‘mentally unfit’, but also the elimination of those members of society who were a burden on the state...”¹

So this is the man to whose accomplishments we medical students were to aspire!!

Sadly, eugenicist ideas such as Professor Berry’s have affected many generations of doctors and scientists up to the present, despite what *should* have been learnt from the tragedies of history.

Testing and abortion of disabled unborn babies is the clearest example of eugenics in our nation today. Along with advances in technology and increasing knowledge about human genes, tests have been developed to detect various abnormalities in unborn babies. Because babies in the womb are not accorded their right to life, and because abortion is so widely practiced even on normal babies, the scene is perfectly set for the eugenic elimination of the disabled by abortion.

Types of prenatal diagnosis

Presently, almost every unborn baby undergoes prenatal testing to look for abnormalities. A positive aspect of this is that a few abnormalities can

¹ Richard Jones, “Two Melbourne Medical Men: Professor Berry and the Eugenics Debates”, *Chiron*, Vol.4, No.5, June 2002, p51-52.

actually be treated in the womb, or there can be preparation for early treatment after birth. Ultrasound gives valuable information such as the age of the baby and the position of the placenta.

The overwhelmingly negative aspect, however, is that babies with disabilities are often detected and the parents counseled for the child to be aborted rather than to be cared for. In theory, counseling is supposed to be non-directive, but in reality, it usually places subtle or not so subtle pressures on parents to opt for abortion. Information about the disability with which the baby has been diagnosed is often presented in a negative and frightening light, making parents feel they could not cope. A survey at a Melbourne hospital over a 5 year period found that only 3 of 179 women decided to continue pregnancy after a diagnosis of Down Syndrome was made. This is equivalent to a selective termination rate of 98.3% of affected babies.² According to a report issued each year on the illnesses and deaths of babies and children, 71 unborn babies with Down syndrome were aborted in Victoria in 1998.³

In the case of our first baby who was diagnosed at 19 weeks by ultrasound with multiple abnormalities, abortion was the first and only option mentioned. When my husband and I stated our intention to continue the pregnancy, our decision was not greeted with any degree of warmth.

Reasons for Eugenic Abortion

There are two major reasons why eugenic abortion has become so well established in Australia and in many other parts of the world. The first reason is that it saves money that would otherwise have been spent on the care of disabled people if they had been born. The second is a false sense of compassion.

The prenatal diagnostic industry is funded largely because of the hope of saving money in the long term by weeding out babies who would require extra medical treatment and care if they were born. If abortion did not follow diagnosis, the government would have less interest in supporting it. For many stakeholders, then, it is imperative that women abort their babies if an abnormality is found.

The eugenic intent of prenatal diagnostic testing was evident in a news clip from South Australia almost 10 years ago. The article read: "The SA study – the first of its kind in Australia – offers women the chance of terminating pregnancies where the child has been shown to be affected by [Down syndrome].... The program's introduction in the early 1980's has lowered the incidence of such defects in SA to nine births a year, compared with 47 in Western Australia, where no such test is carried out". (I'm sure "such tests" are carried out now!) The article continues: "The professor of chemical pathology at the Women's and Children's Hospital, Professor David Thomas,

² Caroline Chisolm Centre for Health Ethics. Conference Proceedings of Scientific, Medical, Ethical and Legal Aspects of Prenatal Screening and Diagnosis, September 17, 1999, p69.

³ The Consultative Council on Obstetric and Paediatric Mortality and Morbidity. Annual Report for the Year 1998, Incorporating the 37th Survey of Perinatal Deaths in Victoria. Melbourne, 2000.

said yesterday Down's syndrome was the most common cause of mental retardation in Australia. About half the children affected had some severe deformity such as heart or gastrointestinal defect, which required costly major surgery. The lifetime care of an individual was estimated to cost about \$1.1 million, Professor Thomas said."....So far, the pilot study had achieved short-term savings estimated at \$72,000 in the cost of medical treatment for eight infants which were not brought to term, and an estimated cost of \$8.8 million over the long term." (The Advertiser, 15 June 1993)

Dr. Robert Edwards, an IVF pioneer, said at a conference in 1999 that "soon it will be a sin of parents to have a child that carries the heavy burden of genetic disease. We are entering a world where we have to consider the quality of our children."⁴

This type of attitude completely overlooks any contribution an individual can make to society which is not measurable in monetary terms. It also does not take into account an individual's life experience or their own personal happiness. Whilst many disabled individuals may not have a traditional money-earning job, they nevertheless contribute to society in other ways and can live happy, satisfied lives. Our acceptance of people should never be based upon an economic argument.

Knowledge of human genes and their functions will continue to advance, providing ever more accurate information about the genes which contribute to diseases of all kinds. Scientists have frequently predicted that as new tests for genetic defects are developed, they will be eagerly applied to the unborn child in order to abort those who are found to be imperfect. One shudders to think of the day when minor illnesses and imperfections, or even just the potential for a condition, will also be detected before birth.

False compassion

The second reason that people are so willing to accept, and even promote, eugenic abortion is because of a false sense of compassion. Disability is often viewed as a tragedy from which nothing good could possibly result. People believe that a child is better off dead than to suffer the difficulties of being disabled. They believe that the trauma to a mother of having an abortion would be far less than having to raise a disabled child. Unfortunately, disabled people are stereotyped and there is a great deal of misunderstanding. As the number of people with congenital disabilities in the community diminishes, this misunderstanding will worsen. Fewer people will have the privilege of interacting with disabled people and in the process, fewer will realize that while the disabled have extra challenges, they are just as human and just as valuable as non-disabled people. Ignorance breeds fear and intolerance. Also, the ability to detect disability before birth brings with it the expectation that it ought to be used by parents. If it is not, then people, rather than reaching out in support when needs arise, can instead feel that because you chose not to relieve yourself of the burden when you had the opportunity, then you should not expect any help. Rather than attracting

⁴ Canberra Sunday Times. Sunday 23 January, 2000, p11.

understanding and support, couples who do not abort their disabled babies may even be accused of being cruel. I experienced this personally when speaking on talk-back radio. While I viewed the decision to give birth to our daughter and give her the chance to live as something that was loving and natural, the radio presenter asserted that my actions were inhumane. My response was that there was nothing humane about putting a baby through an abortion.

The feelings of compassion which cause people to support eugenic abortion are false because they are simply a manifestation of our society's intolerance and prejudice against the disabled. And they lead to worsening discrimination and prejudice against the living disabled and their families in a manner which is far from compassionate. They also result in the negative psychological and sometimes physical after effects that parents experience following the abortion of their child.

The Right Not to Be Born

Eugenic abortion has become so entrenched that recent events have left the boundaries of common sense far behind. I am alluding to the so-called "right *not* to be born". There has come about the idea that some disabilities are so intolerable (probably for the carers rather than for the disabled person) that parents and children can sue for the fact that the child was not aborted. It is said that the child had the right NOT to be born because in such cases the child would have been better off dead.

I remember some years ago seeing an Australian woman on the news pushing her daughter with spina bifida in a wheelchair. The mother was explaining angrily that she should be compensated for the fact that this abnormality was not diagnosed before birth so that she could have aborted her daughter. Meanwhile, her young daughter was listening to every word.

As intolerance of disability heightens, and the lives of those living with disability are increasingly devalued and made difficult, we may soon have situations where disabled children feel driven to sue their mothers for giving birth to them.

This ludicrous situation, where something as fundamental to human beings as life could be made into something to sue for has arisen because of the concept of there being such a thing as a life not worth living. The definition of which lives are or are not worth living is subjective and depends very much on prevailing prejudices and ideas of economic rationalism.

We must always try to preserve in people's minds the fact that every human life is innately valuable irrespective of the person's attributes. Otherwise there is no end in sight of those who may get added to the list of people deemed not to be worthy of life.

References

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