

The reality of human cloning

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In 2013, researchers at Oregon Health & Science University announced a major scientific breakthrough. They had, for the first time, successfully derived stem cells from cloned human embryos. Today, the creation and destruction of cloned embryos takes place in several laboratories around the country.

Few people are aware of this research, the ethical problems it raises, or the disturbing practices to which it could lead. The dangers are spelled out in "The Threat of Human Cloning: Ethics, Recent Developments, and the Case for Action," an important new report by the Witherspoon Council on Ethics and the Integrity of Science. We ought to heed the warning.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

What is cloning?

Cloning researchers employ a technique called somatic cell nuclear transfer--the same process famously used to create Dolly the cloned sheep in 1996. It involves removing the nucleus from an egg and replacing it with the nucleus from a somatic cell (a regular body cell, such as a skin cell), which provides a full complement of 46 chromosomes.

The egg is then stimulated and, if successful, begins dividing as a new organism at the earliest (embryonic) developmental stages. This new individual is genetically (virtually) identical to the person from whom the somatic cell was taken. It is a human clone.

Theoretically, a cloned human embryo could be implanted in a uterus and allowed to develop into a fetus, infant, child, and so on. The Witherspoon report calls this "cloning-to-produce-children" (often dubbed "reproductive cloning"). Almost everyone opposes it, and it is not yet practically feasible.

Alternatively, a cloned human embryo can be destroyed at the blastocyst stage (about five days after creation) in order to derive stem cells for research purposes. This is cloning-for-biomedical-research (usually called "therapeutic cloning"). And, following the breakthrough in 2013, it is happening right now.

Cloning is unnecessary

So what are the problems with this research? First, it is unnecessary. Scientists long sought cloned human embryos because their pluripotent stem cells would be genetically matched to potential patients (whose genetic material could be used to create the embryos). In 2007, however, researchers found a way to reprogram regular adult cells to become virtually equivalent to embryonic stem cells.

These induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) are genetically identical to the prospective patients from whom they are derived. So they have the same theoretical advantages as stem cells from cloned embryos--but without the creation and destruction of embryonic human beings.

The advent of this ethical alternative diminished the demand for human cloning. Cloning research continued, though, and the Oregon announcement rejuvenated it. But there is no compelling medical rationale for human cloning.

Cloning is wrong

Second, cloning for research is unethical. The science of embryology establishes that cloned embryos are living human organisms; they are members of the species *Homo sapiens* at the earliest developmental stages. Each of us was once an embryo. And all human beings--regardless of age, size, appearance, location (e.g., a petri dish) and method of creation--have intrinsic value and deserve respect. They are not raw material to treat as a mere means to an end. They should not be killed so that their parts can be used for the theoretical benefit of others.

Cloning is even worse than ordinary embryo-destructive research (which utilizes "leftover" embryos from fertility clinics). Cloning is the deliberate manufacturing of human beings solely in order to exploit and destroy them. It is a total commodification of human life.

Cloning also requires harvesting large numbers of eggs from women. This process poses risks to women's health and can threaten their future fertility. And the offer of payment for eggs can lead to the exploitation of low-income women.

Cloning is dangerous

Third, research cloning enables other morally problematic activities. It lays the technical groundwork for cloning-to-produce-children, which raises a host of ethical concerns. It could lead to fetal farming--growing cloned embryos to a later stage so that their valuable organs can be harvested for research or transplantation. And cloning technology may facilitate the genetic engineering of children, as it already has animals.

These are among the reasons why the Witherspoon Council calls for a complete ban on human cloning. MCCL helped to pass such a ban in Minnesota in 2011, but it was vetoed by Gov. Mark Dayton.

The threat is greater now than it was then. Human cloning is unnecessary, unethical and dangerous, and it ought to be stopped.

Editor's note. The following first ran in the September-October 2015 issue of MCCL News. Paul Stark is Communications Associate for Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (MCCL), National Right to Life's state affiliate.

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