

News from the Field

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UK Denies Permission to Create "Designer" Baby

The UK's Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority (HFEA) has declined a British couple's request to genetically screen their embryos as a means of increasing the likelihood that a child able to donate life-saving tissue to their seriously ill son will be born. (The child can only be treated with umbilical cord stem cells obtained from a perfectly matched donor.) The HFEA argued that such screening is "unlawful and unethical" because genetic screening in the UK is only allowed in conjunction with testing to ensure the embryo does not have a genetic disease. The couple's ill son suffers from Diamond-Blackfan anemia, a disease that is not inherited (and therefore would not likely affect future children) and for which screening tests are not available. In 2001, the HFEA allowed a different couple to genetically screen their embryos for a tissue match for their son who suffered from thalassaemia, a fatal blood disorder that is inherited. The debate is now over whether the HFEA has too much authority to make these types of decisions and whether Parliament should be making more of the decisions. The HFEA is a body of appointed officials with no direct public accountability for their decisions.

Swiss City Poised to Become Assisted Suicide Capital

Swiss officials are becoming concerned that Zurich may become the assisted suicide capital of the world. The company "Dignitas," which exists to help people commit suicide, is based in Zurich and has seen its membership soar from 750 to over 1600 in the past year alone. Though the company cannot profit from assisted suicide under law, it does charge a membership fee to belong and accepts donations. Assisted suicide is allowed under Swiss law if the drugs are self-administered and the decision to die is made rationally. There is no provision in Swiss law prohibiting physicians from giving overdoses to foreigners. Critics charge that the Swiss are allowing "suicide tourism" and that doctors cannot adequately judge a patient's true mental state from a single in-patient visit and a review of the medical records. The company has helped 110 people die to date. Swiss officials are considering limiting the ability of foreigners to commit suicide in the country, but those rules are not expected to be implemented until sometime in 2003. Some fear a rush in "suicide tourism" prior to the rules taking effect. ■



A Review of the Book *The Human Embryonic Stem Cell Debate: Science, Ethics, and Public Policy*

(Ed. Suzanne Holland, Karen Lebacqz, and Laurie Zoloth;
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001)

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The Human Embryonic Stem Cell Debate: Science, Ethics, and Public Policy contains twenty articles addressing this highly controversial area of research. Part I reviews the science behind stem cell research, as well as the historical context underlying the 1999 National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) report on the topic. Two of the book's editors also share personal insights gained from their experience as ethics consultants at Geron, a leading biotechnology company engaged in this research.

Part II addresses the political issues lying behind the NBAC report. Three articles evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the report, concluding that its central point of contention concerns the human embryo's moral status. The editors express their dismay at how poorly NBAC justified its conclusion that human embryos may be destroyed in research. Suzanne Holland also addresses stem cell research from a feminist perspective. While making some questionable claims, she raises important concerns about justice and the impact this research has on women.

Part III contains eight articles addressing from various religious perspectives the ethical issues raised by embryonic stem cell research. Somewhat surprisingly, only Gilbert Meilaender's article opposes such research. Ted Peters addresses arguments made by The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity in conjunction with the organization Do No Harm. He incorrectly claims that these two organizations view *stem cells themselves* as potential persons and then proceeds to defeat this straw man by offering a view of personhood as something that "depends on being called by a future parental relationship." Karen Lebacqz notes various instances in which we respect things we kill (e.g., animals in slaughter-houses) and concludes that human embryos can therefore be destroyed in respectful ways. However, she fails to nuance her argument for the issue at hand.

Part IV contains five articles on public policy that, taken together, make this book worth reading. Paul Root Wolpe and Glenn McGee critique the role bioethicists have played in public policy. They assert that rather than simply furthering biotechnology interests, the field of bioethics should serve to clarify important issues and to promote public debate in open and honest ways. The final chapter describes Laurie Zoloth's "journey" as a philosopher on the Geron Ethics Advisory Board. She confesses that she and her colleagues were "ethicists dazzled by the scientists," their thinking always one step behind the latest technological development.

Zoloth concludes the book with a striking word-picture. When driving to Geron's beautiful headquarters, she sometimes missed her turn and ended up in a neighborhood where the future "is far more bleak." Next to the riches of Geron lay utter poverty, where houses, churches, and even health clinics are dilapidated and under-funded. It is this reviewer's belief that apart from the absolute ethical standard prohibiting the destruction of human embryos, the commitment to justice calls for a broader examination of the drive for high-tech medicine when so many have access to little or no health care. Further examination of how justice should be served is greatly needed, and this book provides some good starting points. ■