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Government's role in the cloning brouhaha

THE RECENT announcement by a company called Advanced Cell Technology that it has succeeded in creating a human embryo clone has produced what has become a familiar set of reactions to new developments in the world of reproductive technology.

First is the panic reaction, with many expressing horror, and issuing related demands for legislation banning the particular activity. We saw this when Dolly the cloned sheep first appeared, and when an Internet entrepreneur announced that he would be auctioning models' eggs for prices ranging from \$100,000 on up to those anxious to produce children of model-like beauty.

But the panic reaction is followed quickly by the reassurance reaction. The scientists tell us that really nothing that scary is happening. They told us after Dolly was born that human cloning would either be impossible or its accomplishment would be so far

off in the future that it was not really worth thinking about.

Advanced Cell Technology tells us now that it is only interested in therapeutic cloning and not in the reproductive cloning that would produce live human beings. But we know that others are actively engaged in attempts to make reproductive cloning work, despite the risks that it will produce deformities, as has been the case with animal cloning.

Neither reaction is appropriate to the situation. We need to recognize that scientists, infertility specialists, and entrepreneurs of various stripes are plunging ahead on a wide range of social and medical experiments that have the potential to change the nature of procreation radically, the meaning of family, and humanity itself.

Hundreds of sex selection clinics offer prospective parents increasingly effective methods of choosing whether to bear a boy or girl. Mainstream fertility clinics

are engaged in the purchase and sale of human eggs, gestational services, and, increasingly, embryos.

Babies have been created recently whose genetic makeup represents three different parents' genes, crossing an ethical line generally thought to be very significant and doing so without any policy-making body having had a chance to say yea or nay.

Reproductive technologies hold the potential for much good — for important medical advances, for example. But there are important policy choices to be made.

If sex selection decisions result in significantly reducing the proportion of females in the society, as they have in every society that has practiced sex selection, should we regulate to prevent this? As technology offers prospective parents increasing opportunities for genetic selection and manipulation, should the state draw some

enforceable ethical lines or is eugenics a problem only when a totalitarian state makes decisions to foster a master race and not when private decisions tend in the same direction?

And the policy choices are complicated. They won't be addressed by a rush to judgment by Congress banning cloning of the reproductive variety or altogether. Even if Congress managed in this crisis atmosphere to come up with an appropriate response to cloning, this would leave untouched myriad other issues of comparable magnitude.

What we need instead is to develop a decision-making apparatus capable of assessing the range of important policy issues before us, monitoring developments in the field, and developing appropriate regulation.

We have much to learn from the example of other countries with advanced technologies, virtually all of which have eschewed

our free market approach and treated the issues presented as important public issues calling for resolution by public policy-making bodies.

One noteworthy example is Canada, whose Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies produced its final report, "Proceed With Care," in 1993. The commission recommended certain specific legislation that it deemed important to put in place immediately so as to protect the public interest, restricting cloning, the creation of animal/human hybrids, and the sale of eggs, sperm, embryos, and surrogacy services.

It also recommended the creation of a regulatory and licensing body with ongoing responsibility to monitor evolving technologies and respond to them with appropriate policies.

This body was to be broadly representative, and specifically to include the perspectives of women, the infertile, the disabled, and members of racial minorities, as well as expertise ranging from medical to ethics to law.

The commission found the

need for a broad governmental response compelling — it found stop-gap and fragmented responses inadequate to address the threat posed by reproductive technologies to women, children, and the larger society. Government should act as the guardian for the public interest . . . No other body is sufficiently broadly based or has the mandate to do this . . . How we use reproductive technology is not at root a medical matter, but a social matter.

Our society will not find easy consensus on sex selection, cloning, eugenics, the commercialization of reproduction, and many other issues posed by developing technologies. But it should be easy to conclude, with Canada and the rest of the nations of the world in our advanced technological position, that the issues are too important to be left for resolution by the scientists and other private actors.

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