

Americans and the Clone-and-Kill Mentality

U.S. Society Seemingly Inured to Deadly, Unethical Practices
by Daniel Kuebler

Because of recent advances in stem-cell research, possibilities that were once relegated to the status of science fiction have moved closer to reality. Populations of stem cells can be induced into forming small structures similar to human brain tissue right in a dish. If perfected, such tissue could be used to repopulate damaged areas of the brain. Adult cells can be genetically manipulated in live organisms such that the cells revert back to an embryonic state and begin producing complex yet disorganized tissues known as teratomas. If harnessed, this technology could be used to help regenerate limbs and organs within the body.

Cloned human embryos can be generated from adult cells, and stem cells can be successfully extracted and grown from these cloned embryos. If refined, such cells could be used to treat a whole host of diseases. These biological breakthroughs are occurring at such a breakneck pace that it is difficult to keep up with the complex ethical issues they raise. Yet it is critical that we wrestle with the ethical implications, because what we do with these advances will determine the type of society we become.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the later scenario, in which a cloned human embryo is killed in the stem-cell extraction process. Unfortunately, though, there seem to be fewer and fewer Americans who have a problem with this. Back in 2004, when South Korean researcher Woo Suk Hwang fabricated a similar claim about success in human cloning, it was plastered all over the news. Commentators went back and forth over the ethical issues associated with creating human clones solely for research purposes. After the media frenzy over the fabricated data settled down, things on the human-cloning front went quiet. So quiet that when researchers at Oregon Health Science University (OHSU) successfully obtained stem cells from a human clone this past May, almost no one noticed.

This relative lack of attention is an indictment of where we are today as a society — most Americans no longer see the process of cloning embryos for research purposes as a major ethical issue. Over the past decade, polls have found that many Americans are supportive of doing research on spare embryos left over from in vitro fertilization treatments. While polls on cloning are more varied, recent polls have found that the majority of Americans believe that it is morally acceptable to use human-cloning technologies in order to develop new treatments for disease. That is exactly what the researchers at OHSU were interested in doing. The fact that the embryo is destroyed in the process is not something the researchers — or for that matter, most Americans — seem to care about.

But why would they be expected to care? The abortionist Kermit Gosnell ran a foul shop of horrors in Philadelphia, but after the initial shock, America largely turned away. Every day in this country, late-term babies are dismembered in utero, yet few people raise objections. In such an environment, what chance does a lowly embryo have? If we can't generate sufficient moral courage to recognize the dignity of a 3-month-old fetus that has a beating heart, a developing brain and a recognizably human face, a nondescript human embryo doesn't stand a chance.

It is hard to advocate for the rights of the embryo when a human fetus has none. Cloning and abortion are morally linked. But it goes deeper than that — cloning and abortion are also materially linked, as evidenced by the cloning method the OHSU researchers employed. The process of human cloning requires obtaining the nucleus from a mature cell such as a skin cell. This donor cell is fused with an unfertilized egg that has had its genetic material removed, and this new entity — the unfertilized egg containing the nucleus from the donor cell — is activated to begin dividing in a dish.

For years, researchers had tried in vain to use this process to produce human clones that could develop properly to the 7-day-old stage known as the blastocyst, the stage at which embryonic stem cells can be harvested. No group had been able to demonstrate success in this procedure until now. While the OHSU researchers used many novel techniques to succeed in the cloning process, one detail is of particular interest. They turned to fetal skin cells to supply the donor nucleus — fetal skin cells that came from aborted fetal tissue.

So, if we follow the OHSU cloning process from the start, it proceeds as follows:

- 1) A child is aborted, and his cells are harvested, grown in culture and sold commercially to researchers.
- 2) The researchers use the cells to create a clone of the aborted child.
- 3) The researchers kill the clone at the blastocyst stage to harvest the embryonic stem cells.
- 4) It is all published in a prestigious scientific journal.

This type of cloning is euphemistically called "therapeutic cloning" to make it sound more palatable to the human ear. Just like the disturbing realities of abortion are packaged as "reproductive choice" or "health care," the therapeutic-cloning euphemism is needed to ease our collective conscience. The language has been so effective that many commentators on the OHSU cloning study were under the impression that, because this was therapeutic cloning, no real human clones had been made. But despite the best efforts of many scientists and bioethicists to obscure the truth, the blastocysts created by therapeutic cloning are human embryos, no different in form than embryos created during the normal fertilization process.

Unfortunately, the deliberate obfuscation by the research community has left us with a situation in which most Americans are unaware of what is actually going on and/or unlikely to oppose something that the scientific community labels as therapeutic. The annual "Virginia Commonwealth University Life Sciences Survey" illustrates how this has played out in public opinion: a slow but steady increase in the percentage of Americans who are comfortable with "therapeutic cloning." While this wasn't the case seven years ago, a majority of Americans now support such research. This is despite all the well-documented difficulties of using embryonic stem cells for therapies; for example, their propensity to cause tumors and teratomas.

We are now in danger of allowing cloning and embryo-destructive research to become assimilated into our scientific-research toolbox, just as abortion has. As exemplified by the cells the OHSU researchers purchased to make their clones, the commercialization of tissue from aborted children is the norm in the biotech field. Cell lines from aborted fetal tissue have been used in everything from vaccine development to food processing. While aborted-child tissue is not in the final vaccine or food product, it is used in the development of both. In addition, large numbers of researchers use cells obtained from aborted fetal tissue for basic research into diseases such as diabetes and cancer.

Some researchers have progressed to the point of using fetal-derived cells for therapeutic purposes. One company, StemCells Inc., isolates stem cells from freshly aborted human brain tissue and is now involved in human trials that use these cells to treat spinal-cord injuries and macular degeneration. While many people feel a bit uncomfortable with the use of aborted fetal tissue for research or therapies, they find it hard to object to using fetal tissue that would be thrown away otherwise. Just like they find it hard to object to doing research on embryos that will be discarded anyway or making "therapeutic clones" from human eggs that would be discarded anyway.

While most of the current uses of fetal stem-cell lines could be replaced by cell lines generated via ethical methods, researchers have little incentive to change. Fetal stem cells continue to be used out of convenience, given that many fetal cell lines have been around for decades and have been well characterized. Likewise, for companies such as StemCells Inc., aborted fetal tissue is a cheap, abundant and easily obtainable source of neural stem cells. These dubiously derived fetal cells have infiltrated countless aspects of biological research, and morally compromised human embryonic stem-cell lines are not far behind.

Absent public outcry, such work will continue. Yet, in a society in which abortion remains legal, it is hard for the public to make a coherent case for outlawing research on aborted tissue or embryos, cloned or otherwise. Legalized abortion is the lynchpin to this entire edifice. *Roe v. Wade* transformed our society well beyond the legalization of abortion; it transformed our understanding of what it means to be human. Therefore, any effort to stop human cloning and embryo-destructive research is doomed to fail if legalized abortion remains unchallenged and unfettered. It is encouraging, then, to see the results of recent Gallup polls that show record numbers of Americans identify themselves as "pro-life" and record lows identify themselves as "pro-choice." Yet until those pro-life sentiments are translated into actual protections for women and the unborn, we will continue our inexorable march toward a brave new dystopia.

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Daniel Kuebler, Ph.D., is a professor of biology and faculty associate at the Veritas Center for Ethics in Public Policy at Franciscan University of Steubenville.