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Test-tube babies pilloried again

Physicians' organizations in the United Kingdom are busying themselves with an examination of the ethics of in vitro fertilization and related developments. Why now? And to what end?

The British medical establishment seems bent on making an unpalatable mess of its consideration of the ethical problems occasioned by recent developments in the treatment of human infertility. This week, the ethical committee of the British Medical Association will have held a private but much publicized meeting to brood about the ethical implications of *in vitro* fertilization and the possibility of setting up banks of frozen sperms, oocytes and even embryos. And the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists is embarking on a joint exercise with the same objectives. Naturally enough, an army of pundits has joined in the fuss, announcing to an astonished world that a new revolution of technique has suddenly taken place and that a novel set of legal conundrums has been created overnight. Whether or not physicians are enlightened by the work of the committees now hard at work, it is certain that the public will be confused.

The issues provoked by human embryology are by no means novel. For the past fifteen years, Mr Patrick Steptoe and Dr R.G. Edwards have made no secret of their ambitions to use *in vitro* fertilization of oocytes as a means of treating human infertility. The novelty is merely that their techniques are now reproducibly successful, in Britain but also in other places (see R.G. Edwards, *Nature* 293, 253; 1981). Although first thought of as a technique for treating female infertility, *in vitro* fertilization has also turned out to be a means of arranging for the conception of a live fetus by an oligospermic male partner to a marriage.

Strictly speaking, however, these novel developments occasion no novel ethical or legal problems. So much was made clear in the report in 1974 of a committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (see *Our future inheritance: Choice or chance* by Walter Bodmer and Alun Jones, OUP). For it seems generally agreed that conception is preferable to childlessness within a marriage, and that *in vitro* fertilization using a husband's sperm is preferable to fertilization (by artificial insemination) with male gametes from some sperm bank or donor. It may be appropriate (but can hardly be necessary) that physicians should have guidance in advising their patients when one form of treatment or the other may be advisable; they are more likely themselves to be guided by specialists in the field. It is entirely inappropriate that they should be given the false impression that entirely novel issues have been raised.

One particular red herring, wrongly linked with the practice of

in vitro fertilization because of a recent wave of publicity in Britain, is the fear that there will emerge a new profession of surrogate mothers — people offering uterine hospitality to *in vitro* embryos. The chances of this happening more often now than hitherto are small, while legal precedent suggests that children born in such circumstances would be the children of their host — and that their later disposal would be governed by the law regulating adoption, including the customary strict interdiction against money changing hands.

Superficially at least, sperm banks and frozen embryos are different. That, however, is more illusion than reality. Given that many couples who at present cannot conceive children naturally are driven to AID, what is more natural than that they should seek to make good their disappointment by looking for some genetic authentication of the sperms they eventually use? Such a system would indeed be far preferable to the present amateurish ways of collecting sperms without pedigrees, but it would of course be unacceptable that sperms should be sold at outrageous profit and that the identity of their donors should be advertised or even disclosed. For such reasons, and also because genetic authentication requires supervision, legislation for the licensing of sperm banks is plainly necessary. It goes without saying, however, that sperm banks cannot offer those who use them more than a negative bill of good health; to say that some known genetic defects are absent is not the same as to promise that the particular combination of paternal genes that meiosis had provided in a sperm will be thoroughly welcome.

Similar arguments limit the likely uses of frozen embryos. The bizarre uses of the technique to propagate an endless succession of children from the same parents, often long dead, will run foul of the unwillingness of women to give hospitality to other people's children (and of the long-established unwillingness of physicians to assist them). But the technique might help to avoid maternally transmitted defects, and should for that reason be welcomed in the rare cases in which it is likely to be used. If ethical committees wish to brood about something tangible, they should worry about cloning — still some way off, but no longer out of sight. The trouble is that such a technique may seem to some to offer means of eugenic improvement justifying all kinds of clandestine stratagems — and which are likely, in the end, to be disappointed by the genetic defects well recognized in amphibian cloning. The best safeguard, for the time being at least, is to require that people engaged on such experiments should discuss the implications of their projects with a suitably independent laboratory committee.

Washington Editor, *Nature*

Ms Deborah Shapley has been appointed Washington Editor of *Nature* in succession to Mr David Dickson, who is leaving the journal at the end of March, after four years in the post. Ms Shapley, a graduate of Harvard University, has worked for the MIT alumni journal *Technology Review* (1968–71) and *Science* (1971–79). She is at present Guest Scholar at Resources for the Future Inc. in Washington, DC after three years at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; she is completing a book on Antarctica on a project supported by the Carnegie Endowment.

Nature is looking for a second member of staff to join the Washington office, primarily as a reporter and to commission various contributions to the journal. A formal advertisement will appear next week.

Down with airline cartel

The collapse of Laker Airways should provoke an outcry against government interference.

The benefits of a new technology cannot be assessed in the abstract, but only in the marketplace. This is the conventional wisdom. Whatever ingenuity is lavished on, say, the improvement of mousetraps, an innovation can be counted a success only if its performance and price command a sale among those seeking to rid themselves of mice. For mousetraps and similar products, the primacy of the marketplace is well-established. In other fields of technology, however, all governments choose to suspend the rules