

Morality, prejudice and cloning

The debate in the United States on human cloning took significant steps forward last week. But whether President Bush's ethics panel will serve the public well remains to be seen.

An ironic conjunction occurred last week in Washington DC, when two bodies of thoughtful people held two very different assemblies about human cloning.

The National Academies' Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy presented their report, *Scientific and Medical Aspects of Human Reproductive Cloning* — the outcome of deliberations that included a near-farcical meeting attended by the maverick would-be cloner, Severino Antinori. The committee has demolished any suggestion that there is a scientific justification at present for attempting human reproductive cloning (see page 351). Their valuable review of experiments (see www.nationalacademies.org) amply demonstrates that safety issues alone are sufficient to make such research ethically unacceptable. They also clearly illustrate the differences between human reproductive cloning and the use of nuclear transplantation to produce stem cells (sometimes called therapeutic cloning).

The report also goes over some of the ground previously covered by President Bill Clinton's National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) in its 1997 report on human cloning (see <http://bioethics.georgetown.edu/nbac/pubs.html>), in examining options for discouraging human reproductive cloning. A federal ban on people's freedoms is at best a last resort. They nevertheless endorse it in this case. But, like the now-defunct NBAC, they insist on a 'sunset' provision that any such ban should be reviewed after five years.

The National Academies have refrained from delving into ethical arguments, and it is there that the science of cloning will encounter its deepest opposition. Ethical consideration is essential, but the character of ethical arguments, and how to respond to them, merits reflection. And one questionable aspect was vividly on display at the other meeting in Washington last week, the first open discussion on human cloning by President George W. Bush's Council on Bioethics.

In an earlier essay on the ethics of genetic technologies (see www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1139/MR1139.appf.pdf), the council's chairman, Leon Kass, characterized the NBAC's recommendations on reproductive cloning as "apparently believing there are no other moral arguments [than safety] sufficient to cause us to forgo possible health benefits". On the contrary, the NBAC report spelt out many of the other ethical objections from both religious and secular sources, and stated its intention of setting the basis for a national discussion on such issues.

At last week's meeting, Kass tabled a simplistic tale of scientific hubris, *The Birthmark*, by the nineteenth-century writer Nathaniel Hawthorne (see www.vt.edu/vt98/academics/books/hawthorne/birthmark). That, and his support of human instinctive distaste as a fundamental moral measure of new developments, suggest a determination to confront the research agenda not only with ethical discussion but also with irrational fears and pessimistic foreboding. Who knows? If such a confrontation leads to a full and open debate, science may emerge more trusted, rather than less. But suggestions by the panel that there was little moral difference between reproductive and therapeutic cloning and that the word therapeutic might therefore not be used suggest that both rationality and language are threatened in this panel's deliberations.

Although perhaps tactically prudent at this early stage, it was worrying that no scientific organization took the opportunity to make a presentation at this open meeting. Scientists on the panel find themselves in a deck stacked with fundamental opposition. Those Americans, including scientists and ethicists, who hope to retain the freedom to pursue therapeutic human cloning, following a thorough assessment of the moral issues, should seek to ensure that any appeals to prejudice emanating from this panel are highlighted for what they are. ■

More speed, less speeding

An additional contents page in this week's issue reflects an extra service to which we are committed, but with provisos.

There have been many occasions in the past when this publication has released papers online ahead of their appearance in print. Usually these have been high-profile papers announced at a conference. In such cases, we felt it desirable or even essential to make the paper widely available as soon as possible.

In principle, the sooner a paper is published, the better for all concerned. What is more, researchers increasingly access papers central to their research via the web rather than print. So it is a natural and desirable step to make such advanced online publication a more routine process. This we have already initiated. The appearance this week of an additional printed contents page reflects our commitment to the service and an expectation that the number of papers published in this way will gradually increase. But although we recognize that competition needs to be taken into account, we will oppose the misuse of advanced online publication in that context, resisting

any tendency to cut corners from the process of publication.

The point at which publication occurs should be clearly and unambiguously defined: publication occurs at the moment the paper is first made available to *Nature's* readers, that is, when it is posted online, which could be on any day of the week. Moreover, the online version will be fully edited, and not subject to subsequent change.

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