



# Cloning, by Whatever Name, Smells Bad

‘We must offer a positive alternative.’

**I**N THIS COLUMN I want to make three points. First, various state initiatives are rushing to fund embryonic stem cell research and therapeutic cloning. Second, the naughty word *cloning* is avoided, even though it is in fact the procedure described by the sanitized locution “somatic cell nuclear transfer.” Third, instead of wringing our hands and raising complaints, we who believe that such procedures are moral treachery must offer a strong and convincing alternative and be willing to pay for it, not just pray for it.

1. The Catholic governor of Wisconsin has politely informed two of the state’s bishops, “While I appreciate your thoughts on this important issue, I also feel a responsibility to promote vital research which holds the potential to save countless lives and bring thousands of jobs to our state.” Former Senator John Danforth, an Episcopal minister and co-chair of the Missouri Coalition for Lifesaving Cures, while professing his pro-life record, writes that he supports the “Stem Cell Research and Cures Initiative because it will save lives and because it respects the sanctity of life.” The Coalition’s Web site also notes, as the Wisconsin governor noted, that such research will bring “millions of dollars to our state.”

The lure of the money and the possibly vain promise of cures for Parkinson’s, cancer, ALS and, by some accounts, even Alzheimer’s makes this steamroller nigh unstoppable. I do predict this: you will see a lot of money changing hands. You will see further experimentation, eventually on fetuses. You will see a human clone. But you will not likely see one embryonic

stem cell cure for that fatal pathology called death.

2. In previous columns (“Stem Cell Secrets,” “Stem Cell Challenges” and “Leftover Embryos”) I have offered arguments against the scientific exploitation of human embryos and cloning. What is new in these state initiatives is the change of the name for cloning. The new phrase is “somatic cell nuclear transfer,” or S.C.N.T. While the Wisconsin governor has openly supported “therapeutic cloning,” one of the “ten key facts” of the Missouri initiative is the claim that it “clearly and strictly bans human cloning.” But its provisions specifically endorse S.C.N.T. The initiative does not prohibit cloning of embryos; it only prohibits implanting them into a uterus. Remember: a *somatic cell* (almost any cell of a person’s body) has its *nucleus* (containing the body’s full genetic material) removed and then *transferred* into an enucleated ovum. This is how you get a clone of a person. All that the Missouri initiative prohibits is *implanting* this test-tube twin into a uterus. Think for a moment: when and where did the first test-tube baby, Louise Brown, begin her life? If not in a test tube, where? In its wholly unscientific claim that *cloning* means “implantation,” the Missouri initiative is at best incorrect, at worst deceptive. They should just call it therapeutic cloning. Although cloning, by any other name, still smells bad, enough people will vote for it anyway.

3. And that brings us to the third and most important point. If we disagree with the tendency of scientific research to acknowledge no other moral standard than the promise of a longer and healthier life, even if it means eugenic control, manipulation of reproduction, a neglect of the world’s poor who have no health care, a supreme narcissism in our medical

research and the commodification of our bodies, we must offer more than the impotence of outrage and moral posturing. First, we must know the data and the arguments. We need to show how adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood cells have succeeded and can succeed even more in the healing of disabilities. There have already been real cures, not mere promises. But second and crucially, we must offer a positive alternative. We must show that we are not against science and healing, but that we enter those efforts as men and women constrained by moral limits.

What is more, we must be willing to pay for it. It is disheartening to think of the hundreds of millions of dollars that dioceses have paid out in lawsuits over the recent years. A mere tenth of that amount could have funded a world center for adult stem cell research at one of our Catholic medical schools in this country. If we do not see the official church imagining such a center to institutionalize our commitment to science, our commitment to healing and our commitment to nascent human life, then we must seek out Catholic philanthropists. One would think there might be found a group of Catholics who would donate \$50 million to one of our Catholic medical schools to establish the adult stem cell hub for the country.

The physicians and scientists are out there. Dr. Michel Creer oversees a leading umbilical cord blood bank at Saint Louis University. Dr. David Prentice investigates adult stem cell possibilities at Indiana State University. Stanford’s Dr. William Hurlbut has proposed a strategy for developing early-stage stem cells without creating embryos. Dr. Dennis Steindler, at the University of Florida, has isolated brain stem cells in mice to generate new neurons.

If people and projects like these were amply endowed for their collaborative research, then, no matter how unstoppable the rush to federally fund embryonic experimentation and cloning may be, a true alternative will have been offered to the world of medicine, a way that is not only more ethical in its vision and methods, but quite possibly more effective in healing.

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