



From Australia: destructive research on left-over IVF embryos

1 Introduction

The Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, introduced into Federal Parliament the *Research Involving Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Bill*. This Bill would allow destructive embryo research on embryos left over from IVF.

2 What the Prime Minister said

The Prime Minister stated that he “could not find a sufficient moral difference between allowing embryos to succumb ... and destroying them through research that might advance life-saving and life-enhancing therapies.”

3 Ethical analysis

Ethically inconsistent and naive. These are the words that best describe John Howard’s belief.

When debating legislation to overturn the legalisation of euthanasia in the Northern Territory, the Prime Minister accepted the moral distinction between intentional killing and allowing to die. He voted against euthanasia.

In the context of that euthanasia debate it was proposed that people who were going to die anyway should be allowed to ask the doctor to kill them through the administration of a lethal injection, or through neglect of reasonable care. Supporters of this proposition employed the utilitarian argument that intentional killing was justified because the patient was going to die anyway, that is the outcome or result would be the same. Moreover, the sum total of human happiness would be increased if patients could be put out of their misery sooner rather than later, and also when they are able to make their autonomous choices.

The essence of utilitarian ethics is that the human act is always ethically justified when such an act produces more pleasure than pain, more happiness than misery. So rather than simply discontinuing unwanted futile treatment and allowing the patient to die, it was proposed that such patients could be intentionally killed upon their request.

The Prime Minister rightly rejected this ethically impoverished reasoning, understanding that there is a significant ethical and legal difference between someone being allowed to die without unwanted futile or disproportionately burdensome treatments being applied, and intentionally killing a patient even at his or her own request, even when the motive is “compassion”.

The same reasoning can, and ought to, be applied to frozen embryonic human beings. Maintaining embryos in a frozen state represents an insult to the dignity of those embryonic human beings. Those frozen embryonic human beings, left over from IVF programmes and unwanted for thawing and transferring to their mother’s uterus, can and ought to have the futile attempts to maintain them in this state discontinued. At the moment these embryos are thawed and allowed to die. They are not destroyed, that is no active means are taken to kill them.



What the Prime Minister's *Research Involving Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Bill* would allow, however, is the intentional killing of "surplus" human embryos because they are going to die anyway, and because we might derive a benefit from such destructive experimentation.

In saying that he could not find "a sufficient moral difference between allowing embryos to succumb in this way and destroying them through research that might advance life-saving and life-enhancing therapies", the Prime Minister is embracing the very utilitarian argument he rejected when he supported the *Euthanasia Laws Act 1995*. Thus he is inconsistent in his moral reasoning.

Moreover, the Prime Minister is naïve about the real issues involved in his *Research Involving Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Bill*. His entire second reading speech concerns itself with the harvesting of embryonic stem cells, *as if the harvesting of stem cells to achieve human benefits is all that this Bill will allow*.

In fact the Prime Minister's Bill will allow destructive research on human embryos on a very large scale indeed. Embryos for stem cells would represent only the smallest number of embryonic human beings to be sacrificed for the benefit of other human beings. Most embryos will be used for infertility research, not stem cell research. In fact, the Prime Minister's Bill will allow live human embryos to be used for:

- The better understanding of embryonic development and fertilization;
- The derivation of embryonic stem cells;
- Toxicology studies with live human embryos;
- Testing new drugs on humans rather than animals;
- The examination of gene expression patterns of developing embryos;
- The examination of the effectiveness of new culture media used in ART practice;
- Training clinicians in microsurgical ART techniques; and
- For improving artificial reproductive technologies.

In his rush to give the scientists what they have said they wanted, access to live human embryos to get their stem cells, the Prime Minister appears not to have noticed that he is, in fact, giving scientists what they really wanted all along, the right to treat embryonic human beings as a laboratory resource for whatever scientific experiment they judge will be for the benefit of mankind.

All of which goes to show that once one accepts the utilitarian calculation which asserts the moral legitimacy of killing some people, in this case embryonic human beings, to further benefit the rest of society, it is extremely difficult to restrain further excesses. In crossing the clear moral line, that it is always wrong to intentionally kill the innocent, we undermine our capacity to protect impartially the rights of classes of innocent human beings other than human embryos.

The really sad thing is that in promoting his *Research Involving Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Bill* the Prime Minister is acting in a manner ethically inconsistent with his past performances, and with an uncharacteristic naivety.