

## **BHA BRIEFING 2008: Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill**

The **UK is a world leader** in the groundbreaking science of stem cell research. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill (HFE Bill) aims to **update** the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 in light of **medical and scientific developments** and to maintain the **tightly regulated** environment for embryo research. Provisions in the HFE Bill would also prevent discrimination against lesbian couples seeking fertility treatment and ban sex selection of embryos except for serious medical reasons.

The **British Humanist Association (BHA) strongly supports the HFE Bill**, for both **scientific and ethical reasons**. We have taken the step of addressing all parliamentarians in this briefing as a counter to many of the views recently expressed against it and widely reported.

We have been particularly **concerned** at attempts by **religious groups** to prevent parts of this Bill from being passed, which have been based on religious doctrines and have involved what we view as **scaremongering** and the spreading of **misleading arguments** using highly emotive – and often **factually incorrect** – language.

There are three specific areas which the Christian lobby has focused on: stem cell research and the use of human admixed embryos; ‘saviour siblings’; and IVF research. Although defeated when introduced in the Lords, there are also likely to be amendments made to reduce the legal time limit for, and other restrictions on, abortion when the HFE Bill is debated in the Commons.

We consider the arguments that have been made for **restricting vital scientific and medical research**, for restricting women’s rights and for a homophobic approach to assisted reproduction as **morally wrong**, and we urge MPs to reject attempts to impose a minority religious viewpoint over rational debate and ethics based on human values. These ethics, we believe are shared by the majority of people in the UK. For example, in a MORI poll of 2006, 62% of people said ‘Scientific and other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe’ as against 22% who said, ‘Religious beliefs are needed for a complete understanding of the universe’ and 62% said ‘Human nature by itself gives us an understanding of what is right and wrong’ as against 27% saying ‘People need religious teachings in order to understand what is right and wrong’.

### **Human Admixed Embryos**

#### **Myth**

‘Experiments of Frankenstein proportion’ – Cardinal Keith O’Brien

‘In vitro bestiality’ – The Christian Institute

‘A Bill which will sanction the raiding of dead people’s tissue to manufacture yet more embryos for experimentation’ – Cardinal Keith O’Brien

#### **Reality**

Due to a shortage of human female eggs, the creation of human admixed embryos is vital for the continuation of stem cell research – research which offers unprecedented opportunity to develop cures for many debilitating diseases which currently affect the lives of millions. A human cell nucleus is placed into an animal egg from which the nucleus has been removed, creating a microscopic embryo with more than 99% human DNA. Producing embryos in this way will reduce the number of human embryos used for research, as well as allowing considerably more research than is currently possible.

Stem cells are harvested from these embryos for research purposes, and any embryos created must be destroyed within a matter of days, and can never be implanted into a woman or animal.

We believe the 'ethical' debate around this work should be on alleviating the suffering of real people and future generations, and must reject attempts to prevent vital, life-saving and life-enhancing research on the basis of unshared religious ideologies.

### **'Saviour siblings'**

#### **Myth**

'Creating babies solely for spare parts' – Cardinal Keith O'Brien

#### **Reality**

The HFE Bill allows for choosing siblings whose tissue might be used to help older children with serious, genetic medical conditions. This procedure, used in very carefully controlled cases, might include utilising umbilical cord blood stem cells or bone marrow, and could save and improve the lives of many children.

### **IVF research**

#### **Myth**

'The removal, by design, of the father of the child' – Archbishop of York

#### **Reality**

In terms of assisted reproduction, the HFE Bill provides much needed updates to rules around parenthood, reflecting new laws guaranteeing equality between gay and heterosexual people in other areas such as adoption. While maintaining the welfare of the child as paramount and the need for supportive parenting in considerations for fertility treatment, the HFE Bill removes the 'child's need for a father' condition, thus recognising family forms other than heterosexual marriage. In practical terms, this means an end to discrimination against lesbians and single women. We support this as sensible, timely and necessary.

### **Abortion**

As occurred in when the HFE Bill was debated in the House of Lords (but which were defeated by a large majority), amendments to the abortion law are likely to be introduced during the passage of this Bill, for example to restrict abortion to 20 weeks.

Fewer than 2% of abortions are performed after 20 weeks and, contrary to anti-abortion hype, research shows there has been no increase in survival rates for babies born before 24 weeks gestation. We oppose any amendments which seek to restrict access to or outlaw abortion on the basis of doctrine rather than on evidence.

### **Conclusion**

There is wide support for this Bill:

- The religious lobby's main attempts to limit the Bill were rejected wholesale in the Lords.
- The majority of the public support stem cell research, including using human admixed embryos, for medical research to treat diseases (see surveys MORI 2003 and HFEA 2007).
- Embryo research, as discussed in the Bill, is broadly supported by scientific and medical bodies and associations, and by many patient organisations.

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