

Public discussion about stem cell research

Edinburgh, 31 October 2006

This report was compiled by an independent rapporteur and as such, is an interpretation of the open-floor public debate not a verbatim account.

Areas raised during discussion:

i) Chimeric embryos

When we consider chimeric embryos, in which you take an animal's egg, empty it of its genetic material, then put the nucleus of a human cell inside – someone said this might be considered as a human embryo. Given that 98% of the chimp genome is exactly the same as a human being's, what is the definition of a “human embryo”?

It is not a case of a chimp “being 98% human”. This question is irrelevant because a chimp is 100% chimp, not 98% human.

In legal terms the definition of a “human embryo” is very pertinent, and one that the HFEA should strive to address. What you seem to be asking is whether there a percentage cut -off point between when a chimeric embryo can be defined as human or vice versa.

ii) A philosophical view

A participant stated that the fundamental issues commonly debated do not appear to be resolvable in philosophical terms – this wipes out the entire discipline of philosophy.

As regards to whether philosophy can provide an answer, I would ask why philosophers haven't yet found a consensus?

I believe these questions are resolvable and will be resolved quite soon.

The concept of cells is less than 200 years old – until recently no one even had any idea of what an embryo was. It's an extraordinarily new question in human thinking.

The pro-life movement seems to have given no thought to what their commitments mean when it comes to biological intervention in prolonging the basic human life span. They assume you shouldn't do that, but have no idea why.

With reference to the international situation, all speakers gave examples from Europe and US ignoring the Far East. The moral dilemmas we are debating here in the West simply do not exist in China.

iii) Stem cell potential

Before we try and deal with all the ethical issues, we should explore some of the pragmatic issues - what is likely to be achieved by stem cell research? For example: if we use eggs from different species, how effectively can we reprogram gene expression? Would we be able to trace traits of late onset genetic disorders? These questions need to be addressed first.

When we consider what can or cannot become a baby – for example, frozen embryonic stem cells in cold units in labs – this is a long way from an embryo implanted in a womb. A great deal of intervention has to take place before that entity ever has a hope of becoming a baby.

In terms of genetic identity, surely every cell in my body has the potential to become a baby if we intervened? Where does the argument of stem cell potential interface with these issues?

The cells used in research have come from embryos – not just any cells in the body – the fact that a stem cell has potential in the first place is what some people have a problem with.

iv) Special moral status of human cells

The church's view of the debate seems to imply that human embryonic stem cells are in some way special. In my view all life is pretty special.

You can't equate a cow as having the same moral status as a human.

Just because cows don't sit around having meetings about stem cell research, doesn't make them less special.

We have to ask, how does God see these things? Human beings are made in God's image; we have a unique way of relating to God that is separate to that of other animals.

If the HFEA recognises the special status of embryos, should the law be taking its lead from the Church? The Church argues that humans are special in a divine way – should legislation relate to or take its lead from this religious perspective?

v) Moral status of embryo

Is a human embryo a human being? If it is, logic says we need to legislate to protect the dignity of the human embryo, because of the potential it has. This is not a perceived or future potential – it is a living potential – it exists now. It's a question of human dignity - is a human being worth protecting? We have to work out where a human begins, and logic follows that's where you legislate from – if it's an embryo, then it has the same dignity, the equivalent status, as anyone alive today.

I don't understand why somatic nuclear transfer products are regarded as “human embryos”. For me, a much bigger moral dilemma is egg donation on a large scale. Nor do I don't understand the moral dilemma of using animal eggs in labs to study disease, as we have no intention of taking these further. These cells will never become animals.

A nuclear transfer is regarded as an embryo because Dolly was a real sheep...ergo she came from a real embryo.