

Christian Bioethics

An introduction
to reproductive
technologies



Key Facts

- The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 (amended in 2001) permits scientists to conduct tests on and then destroy human embryos for medical research. However, science has so far failed to find any cures for human illnesses through such research.
- The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 sanctioned the creation of animal-human hybrid embryos for medical research. One such method involves an animal egg being fertilised with human sperm and then later destroyed.
- As Christians we believe that the human embryo should be treated as precious human life made in God's image, rather than as disposable research material.
- The practice of destroying embryos supports the false belief that it is society, not God, that determines the value of human life.



Bioethics

Bioethics, the study of ethics arising from advances in biology and medicine, has increasingly become an area of interest and challenge for Christians in the UK.

The UK has extremely liberal laws in relation to the use of human embryos in particular. It is legal to use human embryos for scientific research, to provide IVF treatment to single and lesbian women and even to create animal-human hybrids.

These advances in medical technology challenge our attitude towards the value of human life and the role of parents, fathers and the family. This booklet examines some of the issues and looks at recent advances in medical science from a Christian perspective.

When does life begin?

Bioethics is of profound importance primarily because it deals with the value of human life. It is therefore important to understand when human life begins, as many bioethical concerns hinge on the answer to that question.

The book of Genesis records that man is made in the "image of God".¹ As we are all made in the image of God, we are separate from animals and have a unique and special value.

The Bible suggests that we become a human being at conception.

King David wrote:²

*"For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed body."*

¹ Genesis 1v27

² Psalm 139v13-16

It is clear that God oversees our entire life, both in the womb and after our birth.

The Bible also suggests that God knew us even before our conception. In Jeremiah 1v5, God is recorded as stating: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." In the foreknowledge of God, we have each been called into being by our creator. Before we were born, God thought of us and planned our conception and birth.

Science also confirms that human life begins from the moment of conception. At conception, a human embryo is created that is genetically distinct from the mother. It is a new, unique human being. All of the hereditary characteristics of this new person are established, including the colour of eyes, gender and build. This is the beginning of human life.

It is with these considerations in mind that recent developments in bioethics are of immediate concern to those who want to honour God in the way that human life is treated.

Unfortunately, recent advances in medical technology, combined with a relaxing of the laws governing the use of human embryos, have led to human embryos being frozen, destroyed or treated as less than human.



The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990

Bioethical questions came to public prominence in 1990, when Parliament passed the monumental Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 (1990 Act).

The 1990 Act created the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, which acts as a gatekeeper for the licensing of individuals qualified to conduct research on human embryos and to treat couples using assisted human reproduction (IVF).

The 1990 Act, subsequently amended in 2001, allows for consent to be obtained for embryos to be used for three purposes:

1. For IVF treatments for infertile couples;
2. To be donated for the infertility treatment of others; and
3. To be used for medical research by licensed individuals.

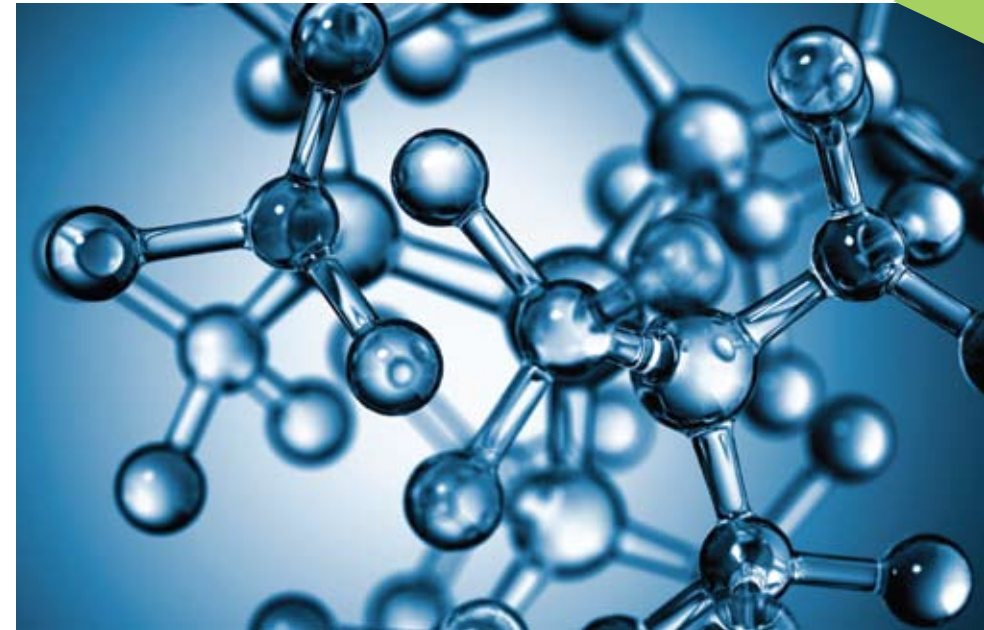
The 1990 Act therefore made it possible for scientists to do three things:

1. To use donated embryos created in IVF for research;
2. To allow for the artificial creation of embryos for research by cloning techniques; and
3. To experiment with, and ultimately destroy, the donated and artificially-created embryos, as scientists claimed that it would help develop treatments for a variety of diseases, including treatments derived from the embryo's stem cells.³

The practice of IVF, which often leads to the freezing or destruction of unused human embryos, and the destruction of human embryos following medical research, raises significant ethical concerns. Primarily:

- As noted above, human life begins at conception. Ending the life of a human being, even if not yet born, is morally wrong and cannot be justified, regardless of how noble the cause might seem, such as medical research. A human embryo should be treated as sacred and made in God's image and not as disposable research material.
- The practice of destroying human embryos supports the false belief that it is society, not God, who determines the value of human life. If society regards the killing of an innocent human life as "justifiable" under certain conditions then this devalues human life.

3 The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 was amended in 2001 to allow for scientists to use embryos for research into diseases and their treatments, and for research into development of human embryos.



Research using human embryos is unnecessary

Although the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act permitted scientists to use human embryos for the purposes of research, this has so far been of absolutely no use in helping find cures for human illnesses.

Human embryos are used in scientific research because, it is claimed, they provide scientists with a rich source of stem cells. Yet experimentations using stem cells derived from embryos (i.e. "embryonic stem cells") have proven time and time again to be universally unsuccessful, whilst other ethical methods of research have seen significant advances in treating a variety of illnesses.

For example, research using adult (as opposed to embryonic) stem cells has been extremely useful in proving treatments for numerous conditions, including spinal cord injuries⁴, heart abnormalities⁵, diabetes⁶ and in supplying bone marrow for transplants (to name but a few).

4 "Stem cell research in pursuit of spinal cord injury treatments", at: <http://www.sci-recovery.org/stem1.Htm>

5 "Stem cells could repair hearts", BBC, 26th April, 2004, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3658927.Stm>

6 "Diabetics cured in stem-cell treatment advance", The Times, 11th April, 2007, at: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/article1637528.ece

Since adult stem cells are extracted from living individuals (such as from bone marrow, brain tissue or body fat) such research does not involve the destruction of a human life and raises no moral concerns.

The use of umbilical cord blood stem cells is also appropriate for research, and has led to effective treatments for serious diseases such as childhood leukaemia,⁷ cancer⁸ and brain damage⁹ amongst others.

Notwithstanding this, scientists continue to pursue embryonic stem cell research unnecessarily despite the availability of other research methods which are not only ethical but have a proven track-record.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008

In 2008, bioethical laws were loosened even further when the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 (2008 Act) was passed.

The 2008 Act:

1. Sanctioned the creation of animal-human hybrid embryos;
2. Sanctioned the creation of "saviour siblings"; and
3. Removed the requirement that the IVF provider take account of the resulting child's need for a father.

The 2008 Act has been described by one critic as "placing human dignity at an all-time low".¹⁰

Animal-human hybrids

The 2008 Act allowed for the creation of 'cybrids', in which an animal egg is fertilised with a human sperm, as well as 'chimeras', in which animal embryos are combined with human cells.

It was claimed that the production of animal-human hybrid embryos was crucial to enable scientists to research into, and develop cures for, a number of untreatable diseases, including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Motor Neurone Disease.

7 "Umbilical cord treatment best for childhood leukaemia", The Guardian, 8th June, 2008, at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/jun/08/health.medicinandhealth1>

8 "Cord blood cancer therapy boost", The Times, 16th May, 2008, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7405167.stm>

9 "Umbilical cords to repair brain damage", BBC News, 19th February 2001, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/sci_tech/2001/san_francisco/1177766.stm

10 Kathryn Wakeling, "Protecting the embryo: why it's essential", 2006.



Scientists alleged that such research was being hindered by a lack of stem cells, a problem which could supposedly be rectified by producing animal-human hybrid embryos from which a large number of embryonic stem cells could be extracted and used for experimentation.

Over 150 animal-human hybrids have now been created since the 2008 Act came into force.¹¹ However, embryonic stem cell research has continued to be highly unsuccessful in providing cures for human illnesses. Not one of these 150 animal-human combinations have offered any treatments for disease.

The production of animal-human hybrids is not only unnecessary, it is also highly unethical since the practice requires human embryos to be used for cross-breeding and then destroyed, therefore devaluing human life.

Such practices also interfere with the natural order of creation, since man was created in the image of God to have authority and dominion over the things of the earth – including animals.¹²

Thus, the creation of animal-human combinations is completely against God's intended design. It blurs what it means to be human as it erodes the distinction between animals and humans.

11 "150 human animal hybrids grown in UK labs", the Daily Mail, 22nd July 2011, at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2017818/Embryos-involving-genes-animals-mixed-humans-produced-secretively-past-years.html>

12 Genesis 1:26

Saviour siblings

The 2008 Act also sanctioned the creation of "saviour siblings". These are children who are born to help treat an elder sibling who is suffering from a life-threatening condition.

This process requires numerous embryos to be created using IVF and tested for compatibility with the elder sibling using a technique known as pre-implantation diagnosis. Once a genetically-compatible embryo has been found, it is implanted into the mother's womb whilst the remaining embryos are destroyed or donated to other women seeking IVF. Once the implanted embryo is born, blood stem cells from the umbilical cord (and possibly other body elements) are used to treat the sick older sibling.

Since genetically incompatible embryos used in the procedure are destroyed, the law again permits the destruction of human life. These lives are ended because they are 'not fit for purpose'. It is also a tragic reality that the science is not working.

Since the saviour sibling is born for the purpose of providing "spare parts" to the elder sibling, who knows what impact this may have on either of them?

Saviour siblings are also likely to be subjected to continual medical procedures if and when needed by their sick older sibling.

Human-beings or human-doings?

The creation of animal-human hybrids and saviour siblings, and the resultant destruction of human embryos during the process, challenges our view of why human life is precious.

Such practices can create the false impression that human beings are valuable according to what they can offer society, what they can "do", rather than being intrinsically valuable as created beings made in the image of God. Thus, we lose our status as human-beings and become human-doings.

If the value of human life is determined by what each life can offer society, then we open the door to serious moral darkness.

Infanticide, the putting to death of a newborn baby, provides a good example. While illegal and not yet accepted in the vast majority of civilised nations, this practice already enjoys robust support in some academic circles and is promoted by some of the foremost 'ethicists' in the world.

Two medical ethicists, doctors Francesca Minerva and Alberto Guibilini, recently claimed in an article published by the British Medical Journal in 2012 that doctors should be allowed to kill disabled or unwanted newborn babies because they are "not actual persons".

They argued that parents should be given the choice to end the lives of their children shortly after they are born because, at this stage, they are "morally irrelevant" and have "no moral right to life."

In the article, entitled "After-birth abortion: Why should the baby live", they argued that infanticide is no different morally to abortion since both a foetus and a newborn baby were only "potential persons".

"Both a foetus and a newborn certainly are human beings and potential persons, but neither is a person in the sense of subject of a moral right to life," the authors claimed.

They went on to suggest that the practice of infanticide, which they termed as "after-birth abortion", should even be permissible where a child was perfectly healthy if the birth was unwanted, inconvenient or too expensive for the parents.

These doctors have come to such chilling conclusions because they have followed the premise that human beings are 'functional, utilitarian beings', and that it is therefore society that determines the value of human life.

Sadly, it is the same principle that pervades our culture and which, in its highest stage of development, has led to some of the most oppressive and Godless societies in the history of the world.





Fatherless children

The 2008 Act also removed the requirement for clinics to “consider the child’s need for a father” before any IVF treatments for the creation of a child are permitted. The term ‘father’ was replaced by ‘supportive parental network’.

This was a result of support by Parliament for same-sex parenting and signals the UK’s more general shift towards sanctioning and encouraging homosexual behaviour.

In practical terms, it means that children, all of whom have a well-established need for a father, may now be freely placed with single women or lesbian couples seeking IVF treatment, or two men by way of surrogacy. Thus, we have now seen the first lesbian couple sign a birth certificate as ‘parent’ and ‘second parent’.

The message conveyed by this amendment is that the existence of a father is not necessary. This flies in the face of all the evidence that demonstrates the crucial need for a father, as well as a mother, in a child’s development. It also violates God’s clear design for families.

Studies show that children brought up in traditional families, and therefore exposed to the complementary role models of both mother and father, do significantly better in every aspect of their lives compared to those raised in single parent or ‘alternative’ homes.

Sociologist Patricia Morgan, who has written the largest review of such research ever published in Europe, concluded that:¹³

- Evidence from around the world shows that the heterosexual married family is the most successful child rearing environment.
- Many studies indicate significant differences between homosexual and heterosexual parenting outcomes for children; in particular, children are more likely to become involved in homosexual behaviour themselves if raised by homosexual parents.

Other studies have found that:

- An absence of nuclear family arrangements exposes children to a higher risk of sexual abuse. One study found that: “the risk of abuse and neglect is likely to be exacerbated where substitute individuals fill the roles of biological parents” and that “pre-schoolers in step-parent – natural parent homes . . . are estimated to be 40 times as likely to become abuse statistics as like-aged children living with two natural parents”.¹⁴
- Children from married heterosexual couples perform much better at school than those from families led by cohabiting heterosexual couples and homosexual couples.¹⁵

It is important that further policy in this area recognises the need for both a mother and a father in a child’s development. The best interests of the child should always prevail, not the preferences of adults which would contravene those interests.

¹³ Morgan, Patricia, “Children as Trophies: Examining the Evidence on Same-Sex Parenting”.

¹⁴ Daly, Martin and Wilson, Margo, “Discriminative Parental Solicitude: A Biological Perspective” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 46, May 1980.

¹⁵ Sarantakos, Sotirios, “Children in Three Contexts” *Children Australia*, volume 21, 1996, pages 23-31.

Make your voice heard

At Christian Concern and the Christian Legal Centre we are determined to campaign against the unethical use of human embryos. We seek to defend the sanctity of life and raise a Christian voice in this arena.

If you want to help us campaign on this, and other issues, and help us to promote Christian truth in the public sphere, then you can do so by joining more than 64,000 people who support our work. Please visit www.christianconcern.com to find out more and join our e-mail list.

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Christian Concern is a campaign group and a policy and legal resource centre that seeks to promote Christian truth in the public sphere.

The team of lawyers and advisers at Christian Concern conduct research into, and campaign on, legislation and policy changes that may affect Christian freedoms or the moral values of the UK. Christian Concern reaches a mailing list of over 65,000 supporters.

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