

3/1/12

MARKKULA CENTER FOR APPLIED ETHICS

~~Cloning:~~ Cloning: Just Because We Can, Should We?

By Margaret R. McLean, Ph.D.,

Human cloning came a step closer earlier this month when physicist Dr. Richard Seed announced his intention to open a clinic to clone babies for infertile couples. The idea of creating human genetic duplicates began to be debated in earnest when Dr. Ian Wilmut and Dolly the lamb grabbed the headlines last February.

Dolly's celebrity resided in her genes. The first animal cloned from an adult cell, Dolly was an exact replica of her mother, her own mother's identical twin.

What surprised many of us was not that animal cloning had been attempted but rather that it had actually worked.

We agonized over Dolly's sudden appearance -- surely, we had reached an unfordable ethical gulf. We could not -- would not -- build a bridge to a world inhabited by photocopies of ourselves. Now, as cloning's "yuck factor" ebbs away, people seem resigned to the fact that, for better or for worse, what can be done probably will be done. Human cloning seems unavoidable.

"New things of any kind -- mechanical, biological, intellectual -- always tend to create fear," Seed said. "Then the subject becomes tolerated and ignored...And the third stage, which always happens, is that the subject becomes enthusiastically endorsed, and I think the same thing will happen in human cloning."

"If we can, we will" is a dangerous motto for medicine. I, for one, believe that the possible is not the inevitable. Life is much too complex for that. The path from fear of cloning to complacency to enthusiasm is not one we must tread. Instead, we ought to listen to our fears -- not so much to overcome them as to understand them. Why are we afraid that a wolf may inhabit Dolly's clothing? Do we fear a loss of human distinctiveness, a rise of human malevolence, a perilous future for children whose mothers are also their twins?

For some people, cloning is a science fiction dream come true. Grieving parents could replicate a child killed in a tragic accident. Or a child could reproduce a dying parent. We could have a child literally of our own -- without the interference of the unnecessary, and potentially inferior, genes of another.

Cloning's brightest promise rests in the curing of genetic disease -- a Tinker Bell dusting of cells with protective genes. These enhanced cells would generate cloned children who possess the shielding gene in every cell. And, surely, creating a clone to supply user-friendly bone marrow to a victim of the ravages of cancer is an act of supreme compassion.

Aging can't be denied

Disturbingly, Dolly seems to be growing old before her time. Her chromosomes are not perfect twisted ladders of a little lamb but the frayed strands of an aging sheep. Dolly's genetic clock may be keeping

sync with that of her mother. She may be a lamb in mutton's clothing.

Can we turn back the clone's clock, or will the child be the same cellular age as the parent, a tumbling toddler with the protoplasm of a 30-year-old? Will Dolly's human counterpart literally grow up, and old, too fast?

Seed wants to help couples in which both partners are infertile to conceive offspring genetically related to one parent. In fertility, the argument goes, ought not be an impediment to genetic parenthood any more than nearsightedness is an impediment to sight. As long as we can help, we ought to do so. It's glasses for the myopic; cloning for the infertile.

Choice is as much a part of American culture as mom and apple pie. The freedom to choose whether to have children protects human dignity and physical integrity on the most basic level. In the intimate area of procreation, we are comforted by the fact that no one can tell us what to do. But does the desire to choose freely translate into being helped in whatever choices we make?

Can we tolerate failure?

Seed seems to think so. After all, if an infertile couple truly desires a genetically related child, ought one not be provided for them through cloning? And, if it requires 276 failures for each success -- as it did with Dolly -- is it worth the risk? We implore pregnant women to avoid caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and long plane flights in order to minimize risk to the life and health of their offspring -- a risk far less than 276 botched jobs per healthy, bouncing baby. With the expectation that even if we cannot be helped, the medical community will not knowingly harm us or our children, would we participate in such a risky business?

Cloning nudges open the floodgates of parental expectation, leaving children valued and evaluated according to how well they live up to their genetic blueprint. There is danger in seeing a child as an accumulation of desired traits. The future is cut off for choice and expectation. But, imagine a Michael Jordan clone unimpressed by basketball, a replicate Kathleen Battle unwilling to sing.

Whose future?

Responsible parenthood involves striking a balance between the fulfillment of parental dreams and what philosopher Joel Feinberg calls a child's "right to an open future." A child's future ought to be left open, not predicted and predetermined. Children exist for their own sake and anticipate their own futures -- futures open to possibility. The query "why aren't you more like your mother?" would reverberate painfully in the ears of a child who is, in fact, just like her mother. What makes us who we are is a mysterious mixing of genes and environment.. Children of cloning can never be "just like mom."

Cloning leads to "life expansion," boasts Seed. It drags us away from death's door and promises eternal genetic life. I never need to face my own mortality -- I can live under the skin of any clone. I never need to grieve over my slain child, my senile father -- their genes can continue. But, the promise of immortality -- is a false one. We are born dying; nothing stays death's hand. The one guarantee life offers us is not happiness of children or even life itself, but death. It would go better for us if we acknowledged that a father's clone will never be "dear old dad," and that we all will sleep the sleep of eternity.

*A version of this article appeared in the January 18, 1998 of the San Jose Mercury News.
Copyright 1998 Margaret R. McLean, Ph.D.*