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Deliverance

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GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

BOARD OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

*

MAY 2001

DELIVERANCE

The General Assembly:

1. Agree the Board's approach to Human Genetics as follows:

- (i) Endorse stem-cell research in general, and medical treatment using stem cells derived from the patient concerned or from a consenting donor.
- (ii) Affirm that IVF treatment may be appropriate treatment for some couples, (iii) Recognise that since God intended human embryos as a means to the end of human reproduction, it may, therefore, be right to use a human embryo in IVF research, (iv) Given that the law allows research on human embryos, welcome the limitation of research to 14 days, and oppose any extension of that limit, (v) Oppose the use of embryos created from human sperm and ova in medical research or treatment, other than that concerned with human reproduction, (vi) Recognise that human embryos created by cell nuclear transfer may be used in medical research and therapy, subject to the 14-day limit, (vii) Recognise that while it may be acceptable to pursue therapeutic cloning, we affirm opposition to human reproductive cloning, (viii) Should any babies in future be born from human cell nuclear transfer embryos, we affirm they will be fully human, made in the image of God, answerable to God according to their abilities, and our "neighbours" whom God commands us to love, (ix) Welcome research into alternatives to the use of human embryos in medical research or treatment.

4. Social Interests

4.4 Human Genetics Group

Over the last few months, much of the Human Genetics Group's work has concerned the "Donaldson" Report and its Recommendations on Stem Cell research.

Why All the Interest in Stem Cells?

All of us began life as a fertilised egg. This divided into two cells, and each of these divided, and this happened again and again until our bodies now contain millions upon millions of cells. All of our cells have the same genes, but they have specialised in different ways to form the different sorts of tissue in our bodies.

Some common diseases (diabetes and Parkinson's for example) happen when one type of cell fails, and could be cured if we could replenish a sufferer's supply of that type of cell. This means getting them from elsewhere, or - much better - persuading some of the sufferer's own cells to change into the type needed.

At the moment we can't make just any cell from our bodies change into another type of cell. However we can do some things with the less-specialised cells called 'stem cells' which specialise in our bodies as required to replace worn-out cells. But even by the time we're born, each of our stem cells has already specialised too far to turn into just any type of cell, and it can be hard to find stem cells of the type and number we need.

The easiest place to find human stem cells is in a human embryo a few days old. These are made up of no more than a few hundred cells, and half of these are completely unspecialised stem cells which can become any other kind of cell in our body. So researchers have been calling for a change in the law to allow cells to be taken from human embryos, to find out how stem cells develop, and perhaps to use in medical treatment until we can use a patient's own cells. These embryos would be made *in vitro* and might be spare ones from IVF treatment (which would otherwise be discarded), or made specially for this research from sperm and ova, or, to preclude rejection by a patient's body, made by 'cell nuclear replacement' ('the Dolly method') from a patient's own cell and a donated human egg.

upon embryos for purposes which are related to the health, or otherwise, of embryos, and arguably are for embryos' collective benefit. The research now permitted is for patients' benefit, not for embryos' benefit. The former respects embryos' biological agenda; the second treats them as resources to be exploited at will.

MPs were not persuaded by the Board's letter, and by objections from other religious groups, but voted by 366 to 174 to accept the Donaldson Recommendations. The Lords also voted to accept them, by 212 to 92, and the research was authorised in principle as of 31 st January. But the Board was heartened by the responses from some MPs, who had clearly thought hard about the ethical issues and had come to a conscientious decision, whether for or against the Recommendations.

Since stem cell research and "therapeutic cloning" may produce standard medical treatments, it seems unsatisfactory for the Assembly to have an ambiguous position upon the former, and never to have addressed the latter. The Board believes that the General Assembly ought to take a position upon these matters since this field is developing so rapidly.

Conclusion

1. The Board aims to help people live the best lives they can. Since the human body repairs injury by generating new cells which are genetically and functionally identical to others which it already possesses, the Board doesn't think it wrong in principle to do this in the laboratory for someone whose body cannot do this for itself. That is, the Board isn't against cloning a person's cells in order to produce "spare parts" or fresh cells of a special type for that human being. Nor does the Board think it wrong in principle for a volunteer to donate cells for use in the medical treatment of another human being. The Board is therefore in favour of stem cell research as such.

2. In 19% the Assembly affirmed "the sanctity of the embryo from conception", and presumably had serious reservations about the use of embryos in research or treatment. But the Assembly also recognised "that the IVF treatment may be right for [some] couples", treatment which depends upon the use of human embryos in IVF research. So notwithstanding the Assembly's high view of the human embryo, the Assembly stopped short of saying that it is always wrong to use human embryos in research.

3. We can only use human embryos in research if God has not forbidden it. There comes a point in a human embryo's development when we must call it a baby, and we should cherish babies. Christians who accept the use of human embryos in research must, therefore, limit the age up to which embryos may be used. Current legislation forbids researchers to allow embryos to develop *in vitro* beyond their 14th day. At this age the "primitive streak" begins to develop, which is the earliest stage at which it is possible to tell if the embryo will develop as one person, or twins etc., or develop only as a placenta. If human embryos are to be used in research, we may reasonably argue that up to 14 days of age they are still embryos, not babies.

4. For guidance as to the type of research in which human embryos might properly be used, the Board looks to God's purposes. God created us "to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever". Our physical development from embryo to adult is part of the process by which God means us to "progress in wisdom and age and favour before God and man". From this it is evident that God intended human embryos, not as an end in themselves, but as a means to the end of human reproduction. The embryos used in IVF research are denied the opportunity

to develop,
but through their use, other embryos develop which otherwise would not do so, thereby contributing indirectly to human reproduction. So if it is ever permissible to use human embryos in research, it is certainly permissible to use them in IVF research. Conversely, to concede that human embryos may be used in IVF research is not to concede that they may be used in any other type of research.

5. If God intends human embryos as a means of human reproduction, we certainly go *beyond* God's intention if we use them for other purposes. The Board takes the stronger view that we go *against* God's intention if we so use them, and hence opposes their use in medical research or medical treatment.

6. The above 5 points refer to human embryos created from human sperm and (whole) human eggs; but since the creation of "Dolly", it has been clear that human embryos might also be created by cell nuclear replacement. Knowing human nature, it has also been clear that human embryos would be created in this way sooner or later, however much we may regret this. Since Parliament has now given the go-ahead for their creation, we must consider how we ought to treat them.

6.1 We could argue that human embryos should be treated alike however they are created. However the traditional arguments against the indiscriminate use of human embryos apply specifically to embryos created from human eggs and sperm, and can't be applied to human embryos created by cell nuclear replacement.