

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
18 May 2013

Plan B, Freezing Eggs and Reproductive Technologies: Who Is In Control?

Ethicist and legal scholar, Robert P. George, recently summarized the controversial life of Sir Robert Edwards, Nobel Prize-winning pioneer of in vitro fertilization (IVF), who died in early April at age 87. Today, there are literally millions of people in the world today who would not have been born had it not been for the IVF technology Edwards launched. In his book, *A Matter of Life*, which Edwards co-authored with Patrick Steptoe, he described the embryo as “a microscopic human being—one in its very earliest stages of development.” As George argues, what Edwards rejected was the sanctity-of-life ethic and the principle of the equality of human beings regardless of stage of development or condition of dependency. For Edwards, human embryos did not yet qualify for protection against manipulation and practices such as abortion and embryo-experimentation. A part of his legacy as an IVF pioneer is the vast number of human beings destroyed or in a “state of suspended animation—a kind of moral limbo—in cryopreservation units in IVF clinics.” They are frozen embryos—“in a frozen condition—neither dead nor, in any robust sense—alive.” The important bioethicist, Leon Kass of the University of Chicago, has raised other concerns about Edwards and his IVF legacy. Kass feared that IVF would “lead to cloning, genetic manipulation of embryos, surrogate pregnancies, and the exploitation of nascent human life as a research tool.” Kass has been proven to be correct. Human and genetic technologies, which IVF helped to spawn, have pushed the human race to the point of significant manipulation of life, not merely to deal with the matter of infertility, but to give parents options on the kind of child they actually want. With significant audacity, Edwards once said that his work “was about more than infertility. . . [It was about] who was in charge, whether it was God Himself or whether it was scientists in the laboratory.” Edwards believed that his IVF technology answered the question: “It was us.” However, the technological imperative needs to be challenged. Just because we can do something in the human genetic and reproductive technology area, does not mandate that we must do it. The question of ethics is the much larger question: Is it right or is it wrong? Do such technologies demean and/or reject human dignity? Each life, I believe, at whatever stage of development, is infinitely precious and valuable. To manipulate the human embryo, to destroy embryos that are not implanted in the womb of a woman, or to freeze those embryos not used in IVF does not conform to the sanctity-of-life ethic; it violates it. When one views the question of who is in control from that perspective, the answer is then obvious—we are not in charge!! In the name of science, we are making quite a mess of things.

For the remainder of this *Perspective*, I want to use two examples to demonstrate the ethical fallacy of the technological imperative when it comes to human genetic and reproductive technologies:

- First is the debate over access to Plan B—“the morning-after pill.” In April of this year, Judge Edward Korman of the US District Court for the Eastern District of New York handed

down an extraordinary order: He ordered the Food and Drug Administration to make emergency contraceptives, Plan B, available without a doctor's prescription or parental permission to girls without any restriction on age. As many have pointed out, this order would mandate Plan B for girls as young as 10 or 11, without medical or parental involvement. Such an order is remarkably absurd and immensely hypocritical, for currently a 10 or 11 year old girl cannot even get a Tylenol in school without parental permission. But with this order, young girls could purchase much more serious over-the-counter medicine without anyone supervising the purchase or even being aware of it! In his ruling, Korman criticized the government's plan to lower the age restriction to 15 years old from 17 years old, but to still require that buyers show identification. The judge ruled that the identification rule is a barrier to lower-income people, minorities and young people who want access to the drug. [The Obama administration is appealing the ruling.] As columnist Kathleen Parker has observed, the argument being used to support the Korman ruling and all those who wish children to have access to the Plan B drug is that any restriction of any age is blocking a woman's right to self-determination. But 15 year old girls (the age Obama wants girls to be able to buy the drug over-the-counter) and those younger (if Korman's ruling stands) are children!! As Parker asks, "what about the right of parents to protect their children? . . . The slippery slope away from personal autonomy is no paranoid delusion. Whatever parents may do to try to delay the ruin of childhood innocence, the culture says otherwise: Have sex, take a pill, don't tell mom. Where, finally, do we draw the increasingly blurred line for childhood?" In my opinion, public policy at any level of government should involve, rather than marginalize, parents. As Parker compellingly concludes, ". . . the debate about Plan B is fundamentally about whether government or parents have ultimate authority over their children's well-being." The question that technology such as Plan B presses is who is in charge? Is the personal autonomy of this Postmodern culture pushing the limits of autonomy to include 10 or 11 year old girls? Apparently yes, according to Planned Parenthood President Cecile Richards, who argues that "science is the only determining factor when it comes to the well-being of our children." This is not a question of science; this is a question of ethics—and common sense wisdom. It is patently ludicrous to empower 10 or 11 year old children to purchase contraceptives without parental involvement!!

- Second, consider the growing trend of women freezing their eggs. In a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Sarah Elizabeth Richards summarizes the case for egg freezing. She writes: "Between the ages of 36 and 38, I spent nearly \$50,000 to freeze 70 eggs in the hope that they would help me have a family in my mid-40s, when my natural fertility is gone. For this baby insurance, I obliterated my savings and used up the money my parents had set aside for a wedding. It was the best investment I ever made." She also writes that egg freezing has the effect of making a "woman more open to using science to explore alternate routes to creating their families. One woman decided to stop waiting for the right man at the right moment and explored using donor sperm to have a baby on her own, using her frozen eggs. And several other women who began the egg freezing process firmly opposed to using donor eggs turned to those when their own failed." She also mentions that if your frozen eggs do not survive thawing or fertilization or fail to grow into robust embryos, it is possible to go online to one of the commercial egg banks available and order a batch of frozen eggs donated by a woman who looks like you. But as Christine Rosen of the New America Foundation has argued, egg freezing and IVF will likely increase preimplantation sex selection and genetic

diagnosis. If a woman thaws her eggs and practices IVF, why should she not also be certain she gets the kind of child she wants—in terms of gender and other quality traits?

- Further, there are many options available for such screening in today’s fertility clinics: “The emphasis on parental control in egg freezing could lead to subtle shifts in our attitudes about having and raising children. Control changes our expectations. . . The more control we have, the more we expect the end result—the child—to turn out the way we want it to, and the greater our disappointment when he does not.” Such increasing control enables women and parents in general to indulge their personal hubris and assume that they truly are in charge. They are not! God in His common grace has enabled humanity to understand the science and implement the techniques that produce egg freezing and IVF. But the fallen nature of humanity means that increasingly such technologies will be used for selfish, self-indulgent reasons that have little to do with the miracle of procreation and the privilege of rearing children. We seek to do all of this on our terms for our self-centered reasons. When we think we are in total control, then we make wrong ethical choices resulting in horrific consequences. History is littered with such examples. Why do we believe we will be different? The message of genuine biblical Christianity is that God is in control. He is our creator, our Redeemer and our Lord! May our dependence on Him and our recognition of His Lordship guide our decisions in the genetic and reproductive technology areas of science.

See Robert P. George in the *Wall Street Journal* (19 April 2013); Kathleen Parker in the *Washington Post* (6 May 2013); and Sarah Elizabeth Richards in the *Wall Street Journal* (4-5 May 2013).