

Britain: High Court decision attacks embryo-based medical science

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A judgement was handed out by the British High Court in December, opposing the method of screening test tube embryos to determine the tissue type of a couple's baby.

The couple, Raj and Shahana Hashmi, had been using the technique since July 2002, in an attempt to conceive a baby whose umbilical cord would have exactly the same type of tissue as their three year old son, Zain. Doctors intend to use a cell transplant from the tissue to treat Zain, who is suffering from beta-thalassaemia, a dangerous blood disorder. Shahana Hashmi is using in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment, in which only embryos with the right tissue type are re-implanted in her womb.

The High Court case was brought by Comment on Reproductive Ethics (Core), an anti-abortion campaign group supported by the Catholic Church that believes it is immoral to decide medically whether an embryo is terminated or not. Its argument is based on the religious and completely unscientific notion that a newly conceived embryo, well before the brain and other major organs of the body are formed, is a full-fledged human being, with the same right to life as a child or adult. Core is mounting a well-financed campaign against medical science based on the embryo, and is particularly opposed to the development of stem cell research.

IVF treatment has a long history in Britain, with thousands of women having had successful pregnancies with healthy babies as a result. In 1990 parliament passed legislation that set up the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), a body that monitors the techniques used by doctors. IVF treatment necessarily involves the selection of some embryos and rejection of others, an approach opposed by Core.

Core was able to use a legal technicality, that HFEA was not empowered to consider the choice of embryos for the benefit of another person—in this case the sick child. It does not affect HFEA's ability to grant license to medical practitioners screening embryos for genetic disorders to

prevent a child with a genetic disease from being born.

Josephine Quintavalle, spokesperson for Core, made clear that defending religious dogma was perceived to be more important than saving the life of a three year old: "Core will continue to campaign against any procedure which puts one child at the disposal of another human being, no matter how emotional and moving the circumstances which motivate such proposals."

Quintavalle also claimed that the court ruling was a victory for democracy: "The people making these decisions are unelected committee members when such decisions should be for parliament because of their significance."

This argument is spurious. The vast majority of the population support the use of IVF measures, and Core and its right wing backers show no interest in democracy on any other issue. On the piecemeal privatisation and running down of the National Health Service, opposed by virtually the whole population and certainly threatening the lives of millions of human beings, Core has nothing to say.

Why does Core want the issue of embryo screening raised in parliament? It is using the issue of screening embryos to mount its campaign against the technique likely to revolutionise medical practice in the next decades, namely the use of stem cells to repair human body organs or even to grow replacement organs.

Stem cell research offers possible treatment and even cures for thousands of people suffering from diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, as well as victims of spinal cord injuries. Although still at an early stage of development, it is being actively researched by scientists. A major source of stem cell lines is those taken from human embryos. Core, and its Christian fundamentalist backers, want a parliamentary debate which it hopes would enable it to follow its US counterparts.

President George W. Bush last year severely restricted

federal financing of such research, in order to gain support from the far-right anti-abortion sections of the Republican Party.

A parliamentary debate would give the possibility of whipping up the most backward hysteria in the media—a preview of which has been seen over the last few days in relation to the alleged cloning of a human baby by the Raelian religious cult. Fears of “mad” scientists creating “designer babies” would be used in attempting to pressurise the Blair government into following the Bush administration or even introducing legislation against medical practice and research involving embryos.

Britain is attempting to become the world leader in stem cell research, using the opposition of the Bush administration to attract inward investment by the biotech corporations. British Science Minister Lord Sainsbury has promised more funding for research in this field, hoping to boost the profits of Labour’s business supporters. Core is attempting to reverse this trend.

So far the medical establishment has made little comment on the High Court decision. Dr Vivienne Nathanson, head of ethics and science at the British Medical Association, appeared to make concessions to Core by saying that “we must value all children for themselves and not just as potential lifesavers for a brother or sister,” although supporting the use of the tissue-typing technique. The HFEA is to appeal the case and perhaps it is hoped, given the current government support for techniques using embryos, to quickly reverse the decision without gaining much media attention. Whatever the immediate outcome, the US experience demonstrates that the danger of reactionary groups like Core holding back scientific and medical advances should not be minimised.



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