

A C&C about Cloning

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Case 1

John and Mary have been seeing an infertility specialist for seven years. Early on, Mary became pregnant, but they had a miscarriage. Most recently, they have been through two rounds of in vitro fertilization. Both times, only one embryo was produced. Both times, that embryo did not implant and Mary did not become pregnant. “This time it will be different,” Dr. Smith tells John and Mary. “There’s been an exciting new development in fertility research.” She tells Mary she’d like her to go through one more round of fertility drugs and in vitro fertilization. “Even if we only get one embryo this time, the new techniques will help us. We’ll not implant it right away, but instead we’ll use it to make two or three other embryos. That way we’ll have a much better chance of getting you pregnant.”

Almost together, John and Mary exclaim, “That’s cloning, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” says Dr. Smith. “But I think it’s about the only shot you have at having your own baby. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Mary said slowly. “Just the idea of cloning makes me uncomfortable.”

“I understand,” says Dr. Smith. “No one likes to launch into new areas. It’s scary. But that’s how people felt when heart-lung machines and dialysis machines were introduced. This isn’t that much different. Just new technology to overcome more problems. You’re just uncomfortable because it’s unfamiliar.”

For Discussion

Do you agree that cloning is just another new medical technology? Why?

Dr. Smith claims the uncomfortable feelings coming from the newness of the technology. Others would claim them come from our moral instinct or conscience telling us we’re going beyond some moral boundary we shouldn’t be passing. What do you think?

Case 2

Susan and Joe have also been seeing Dr. Smith. They have one child, Joey, who has cystic fibrosis, a chronic illness that makes him highly susceptible to respiratory infections. They spend much of their free time caring for Joey, going through the back patting and other breathing exercises he needs. What makes it even harder is that Joey will be very lucky to make it into his twenties. Susan and Joe would really like to have another child, but don't think they could cope with a second child with cystic fibrosis.

Dr. Smith has used in vitro fertilization with Susan and Joe, and then tested the embryos for the cystic fibrosis gene. Two embryos had the gene, so they discarded them. Three other embryos were free of this gene, but they died, presumably as a result of the genetic test. This test requires cutting off a couple of the embryo's cells, and can sometimes kill the embryo. Dr. Smith tells Susan and Joe that things will be different this time.

"Once we get your embryos, we will clone them all. We'll do the genetic test on one of the clones. Even if the test kills those embryos, we'll be able to implant the clones of the ones which don't have the cystic fibrosis gene."

Susan turns to Joe, "Wow, we'll finally have a little brother or sister for Joey! And, we'll have so much more time to spend together as a family."

Joe is not so enthusiastic. "All this messing around with clones and genes doesn't seem right to me. Aren't those Joey's other little brothers and sisters we're talking about creating and then letting die with these tests. What about them?"

"They're just embryos, Joe," said Susan. "They're not babies."

For Discussion

How do we know how we should view human embryos? Does it really matter?

People have a new level of control over the genetic traits their children might or might not have. Is this appropriate, or should we just accept 'the hand we're dealt'? Why?

Case 3

“I’m sorry,” said Dr. Jones, putting his hand on Tom’s shoulder. “Annie definitely has leukemia.”

“No!! My little ten year old can’t,” cried her mother. “She can’t!”

Tom held his wife, and through the tears asked Dr. Jones, “How long does she have?”

“Well, it depends. With the best therapies we have, a year, . . . maybe 18 months,” he replied. “But if we could find a perfect bone marrow match for her, she might have a chance of beating this.”

“I never really knew why those people went around asking others to have their bone marrow checked for potential matches. Now I understand. I guess that’s what we’ll have to do.”

“Actually, no,” said Dr. Jones. “If you are willing, we can take one of your wife’s eggs, a little tissue from Annie, and fertilize them so that the resulting baby would be guaranteed to be a perfect match for Annie’s bone marrow.”

“You mean clone Annie?” gasped Tom.

“Yes! It’s been done before,” said Dr. Jones. “And in the worst case, if Annie doesn’t make it, you’ll have another daughter to take her place.”

For Discussion

What do you think about having a baby primarily so she can become a tissue donor to save another child? What does this say about our view of parenting and having children?

Some people are concerned that cloning will depersonalize and dehumanize people. How might that be an issue in this case? Would the cloned daughter be any less a person than Annie? Why?

Case 4

“Good afternoon,” said the friendly receptionist to the young couple walking into her office. “How can I help you?”

“We’d like to place an order, please,” said Stephanie, smiling at her handsome husband, Larry, who quickly added, “We’ve already been in to see the catalogues. We’ve figured out what we’d like.”

“Great,” said the receptionist. “What are the specifications?”

“We’d like a boy, blond hair, blue eyes, and somewhere around 6’2” or 6’3”. His IQ should be around 130, with a life expectancy of at least 85 years. We did have a question, though.”

“What was that?” asked the receptionist.

“Well, you know it can sometimes be hard to figure out all the odds on some of these decisions. Can you tell us again, what was the price difference between cloning someone with a 10% risk of one illness, versus cloning someone with a 5% risk of two illnesses?”

For Discussion

Should we be able to pick and choose the characteristics our children will have? Why?

This situation seems a long way removed from helping the people in the earlier cases. Is it really that different? Why?