

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill

The Church of Scotland has been closely involved in debate over the issues of human fertilisation and embryology over many years – both through the former Board of Social Responsibility and through the continuing Society, Religion and Technology (SRT) Project, now part of the Church and Society Council. In this and in other areas, the Church values meaningful dialogue with both scientific experts and politicians.

In 2006, the General Assembly, in response to the latest report within the Church on the subject, decided to:

"Oppose the creation for research or therapy of parthenogenetic human embryos, animal-human hybrid or chimeric embryos, or human embryos that have been deliberately made non-viable."

And the 2007 General Assembly re-emphasised its opposition to the creation of these embryos, seeking to:

"Freshly urge Her Majesty's Government in the proposed revision of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act not to include a legislative provision which would allow the creation for research or therapy of parthenogenetic human embryos, animal-human hybrid or chimeric embryos or embryos that have been deliberately made non-viable."

The 2006 report also states that to argue that the proportions of human/animal "atoms and molecules" involved in the creation of a hybrid makes the procedure more acceptable is "ethically simplistic."

The term 'admix embryo', rather than 'hybrid' appears sometimes to be being used – with the justification that it is therefore not really a hybrid as the non-human DNA in the cell nucleus is removed prior to implantation. This term has been suggested to differentiate between a "true" hybrid with a mix of genetic material from two species and the "cytoplasmic hybrid embryos" which are the current bone of contention. The latter contain a very small amount of mitochondrial DNA from the enucleated egg (the animal part of the admix).

There are other types of hybrids possible, and the current legislation does not ban all of them. It is worrying that the HFEA's consultation booklet of April 2007 on Hybrids and Chimeras contains the following passage on page 10: "Scientists may, in the future, see a use in creating hybrid embryos (by mixing gametes) or human chimera embryos for research and, if in the UK, they may seek an HFEA licence to do such research." This would, of course, be a true hybrid. The concern is that by allowing any admix of animal/human genetic material we are crossing the Rubicon.

There is, however, a further disturbing note creeping into the debate. The suggestion that the creation of hybrid embryos is essential for further research on certain diseases is by no means proven. There is an impression given that success is guaranteed, something which is singularly unfair to patients in these groups. The Church has made the point on previous occasions that the claim that to deny such experiments would delay cures for terminal illnesses is irresponsible and unjustified.