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Monique Baldwin: Pro-cloning activists shroud the truth

The unsavoury facts about harvesting human eggs must be faced

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A FINAL vote about human cloning is looming as the debate begins in the House of Representatives this week. Hidden among the promises of cures and hype about a biotech boom is the assumption that thousands of women will merrily undergo hazardous egg harvesting procedures to hand over their eggs to the cloners.

Foreshadowing an egg shortage, Loane Skene, the acting chairwoman of the Lockhart committee, has suggested that eggs could be removed from women after their death and used to produce cloned embryos for research. Dead women would be raw material for cloning research and become mothers to embryos, to be exploited in turn, in the name of research, scientific kudos and corporate profit.

If that doesn't already take the yuk factor to a new level, it's now emerging that senator Kay Patterson, the sponsor of the cloning bill, wants researchers to be able to help themselves to eggs from dead female fetuses as well.

During the Senate committee inquiry into cloning, Patterson was asked what the public would think of her bill's proposal to allow the harvesting of eggs from aborted female fetuses to make embryos for research. She wouldn't answer.

Likewise, when confronted with this question on ABC radio, the Australian Stem Cell Centre's Stephen Livesey was evasive: "That's sort of science fiction. I think we should stick to the facts." Livesey was told the bill's provision to create embryos using the immature eggs of aborted female fetuses had been confirmed by former members of the Lockhart committee. "Misrepresentation," he claimed.

It's time we faced the facts. Although Patterson, Livesey and other pro-cloning activists don't want to admit it, the bill passed in the Senate by one vote would turn aborted female fetuses into the mothers of embryos that themselves would be destroyed in research. The bill allows scientists to "create human embryos using precursor cells from a human embryo or a human fetus, and use such embryos". As defined in the existing legislation "precursor cell means a cell that has the potential to develop into a human egg (ovum) or human sperm".

These immature sex cells can be used as a source of DNA to create a cloned embryo or matured into an egg to create an embryo by sperm-egg fertilisation.

Patterson has claimed her bill permits only the creation of cloned embryos, never sperm-egg in-vitro fertilisation embryos, for research. But her bill does indeed permit the IVF creation of a sperm-egg embryo using an egg from an aborted fetus and an adult male's sperm. This hidden provision to create fertilised embryos for research using ova from an aborted fetus was directly addressed by the Senate inquiry.

Skene, for the Lockhart committee, acknowledged: "The committee's recommendations envisaged that an embryo could be created for use in this way." And no, she said, the committee had not canvassed public attitudes to such a practice.

Now the recommendations of Lockhart are embodied in the Patterson bill and the Senate has agreed to the creation of fertilised embryos for experimentation using the immature eggs of an aborted fetus. The Senate was rightly concerned about the

creation of human-animal hybrids and cut this from the original bill. Now MPs in the House of Representatives must do something to stop researchers manufacturing embryos from dead mothers and from mothers who have never been born.

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