

Women's health and dignity at risk



A RECENT CALL BY LAW

professor Loane Skene of the University of Melbourne for women to sell their eggs for embryonic stem cell research ignores the medical evidence of the real harm done to women who allow their eggs to be harvested. It also ignores international evidence that the legalisation of the sale of eggs leads to exploitation of women.

Professor Skene explained that embryonic stem cell researchers wanted human eggs for cloning experiments. Women were generally unwilling to donate their eggs for this purpose, so she proposed that women be paid for their eggs. She suggested that payment be below \$5000.

Harvesting eggs is a complicated process. There are drugs to stop the menstrual cycle, daily hormone injections for up to six weeks to stimulate the development of multiple eggs, frequent blood tests to check when the eggs are ready, and a general anaesthetic and surgery to retrieve the eggs using a needle inserted into the ovaries.

Because of the powerful drugs, one of the main dangers for the woman is ovarian hyper-stimulation syndrome (OHSS), which has mild, moderate and severe forms and which affects up to 10% of women. Mild symptoms of OHSS include hot flushes, bloating, moodiness, headaches, weight gain and tiredness. Severe health threats from OHSS include kidney failure, stroke, infertility and even death.

In 2005, several young Romanian women were paid to sell their eggs to fertility clinics in the UK. One of them was Alina Netedu, who worked at a mattress factory in Bucharest and wanted money for her wedding. She was paid about \$300 for 20 eggs. Shortly after the harvest, she developed OHSS and was hospitalised for 14 days. Her doctor said that she would have died if she had not sought immediate help.

In August 2006, a 37-year-old British woman named Nita Solanki did die after her eggs were retrieved for IVF. The cause of her death was internal bleeding and kidney failure. Nine years ago in the US, 22-year-old Stanford University student Calla Papademos agreed to sell

her eggs to pay for her college tuition. She suffered a stroke and, while she eventually recovered, was in and out of a coma for eight weeks.

If trade in human eggs is legalised in Australia, there will inevitably be some women who suffer these serious consequences. No one should take these risks simply for a few thousand dollars.

When the plight of the young Romanian women came to light, the European Parliament recognised this as exploitation of vulnerable women. Therefore, on 10 March 2005, they overwhelmingly adopted a resolution to ban trade in human egg cells in the European Union.

The resolution notes the fundamental principle that the human body and its parts "should not be a source of financial gain". It cautions that "the harvesting of egg cells poses a high medical risk to the life and health of women" and it insists that "particular attention should be paid to vulnerable individuals".

European Commissioner for Health Markos Kyprianou warned that "paying substantial fees to obtain human egg cells ... could open the door to a trade where people in need could be drawn into acts that should instead be motivated by altruistic principles."

The same danger for exploitation exists in Australia, especially in this economic downturn. If someone has just lost their job and is at risk of losing their house, and they're offered \$5000 to sell their eggs, they might not really be free to say no.

University of Pennsylvania ethicist Arthur Caplan commented: "The market in eggs tries to incentivise women to do something they otherwise would not do. Egg sales are not the ethical way to go."

Blood donors and people who give their organs and tissues for transplant demonstrate that we can freely give parts of ourselves as a generous act of love. But if we start to sell parts of ourselves, we demean ourselves and

lose something of our humanity. We are body as much as we are mind or spirit. If we sell parts of our body, we are selling ourselves. And selling ourselves is incompatible with human dignity.

Trade in human egg cells is an assault on the dignity of women. This is why both the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* and the *Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine* include a "prohibition on making the human body and its parts as such a source of financial gain". This is also the main reason why trade in human eggs is not allowed in any state or territory of Australia.

The Catholic Church is opposed to human embryonic stem cell research because it "invariably causes the death of the embryo" (*Dignitas Personae*, 32). In their statement 'On Human Embryo Cloning and Destructive Embryo Experimentation', the Australian bishops said the Catholic Church supported "ethical stem cell research based on adult stem cells, as well as those which are derived from umbilical cord blood". However, the Church opposes "destructive experimentation on embryos".

The American bishops have also in their statement 'On Embryonic Stem Cell Research' expressed concern about researchers who "would solicit women as egg donors for human cloning research, even offering cash payments to overcome these women's qualms about the risk to their own health from the egg harvesting procedure".

Australia's stem cell laws come up for review next year, and it is clear that the advocates of embryonic stem cell research will try to legalise trade in human eggs. Perhaps their passionate advocacy of this cause blinds them to the facts that this will harm the dignity of women, and expose Australian women to exploitation and serious damage to their health. ■

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