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UD MEDICAL ETHICIST COMMENTS ON TECHNIQUE THAT LETS PARENTS SELECT THE SEX OF THEIR CHILD

THERAPEUTIC RATIONALE FOR ETHICAL JUSTIFICATION — A new fertility technique — which separates sperm cells that produce boys from those that produce girls — that allows parents to choose the sex of their child “demonstrates a recurring pattern of ethical justification that is emerging in our society,” says Therese Lysaught, a medical ethicist and University of Dayton assistant professor of religious studies.

“Whenever new technologies are developed, the first justification given is that they’ll be ‘therapeutic’ — they’ll prevent disease, they reduce suffering, and so on. Nobody can argue against that. So they proceed,” she says. But once these technologies are developed, Lysaught adds, they are quickly made available in non-therapeutic contexts.

“Since the technique is available, how can you deny it to anyone who wants it or is able to pay for it? The next step is then turn it into a consumer commodity so that it becomes desirable or obligatory.”

Moreover, she believes that this technique — along with cloning, which follows the same pattern — requires a certain understanding of parenthood: “Whenever a new fertility technique is developed, it doesn’t seem to matter what you’re doing with the egg, the sperm or the cell itself because it’s just referred to as ‘tissue,’” Lysaught says.

“But we’re talking about individuals here. Are children meant to meet certain parental criteria and specifications? Or are they meant to be unique in their own right, to come into this world as a surprise and gift to their parents, with equal parts of both spouses?”

Most of today’s fertility altering issues are “framed in very individualistic, autonomous ways,” Lysaught explains. “So if you clone yourself or you choose the sex of your child, you’re not really making that big of an impact on the world.”

However, she says, when tens of thousands of people make those same choices — then an individual choice creates an authentic social trend. “Only then will we see the real effects of the technology. And how do we anticipate or think about those issues?” The answer, Lysaught adds, is that those issues cannot be understood until they arrive.

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