

Lives of the embryo: An odd place to draw a line against stem cell research

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“There is no such thing as a spare embryo,” President Bush declared, vowing to veto a bill that would allot federal money to support stem cell research on human embryos that were created through in vitro fertilization (IVF) and have been slated to be discarded. Bush went on to call these embryos “real human lives” and to suggest that they were just as valuable as “the lives of those with diseases that might find cures through this research.” Tom DeLay, the Republican leader in the House, agreed with that claim, saying that to use the embryos for research would entail “the dismemberment of living, distinct human beings.”

The president has chosen an odd place to draw a line against stem cell research. There is little moral hazard in extracting stem cells from embryos that are going to be either destroyed or frozen indefinitely. Nothing is lost that would not be lost anyway, and something of enormous benefit may be gained.

And if these embryos are to be judged “real human lives” which must be defended against manipulation, then the president and his supporters have, perhaps unwittingly, called into question the practice of IVF.

IVF has become a routine medical option for couples facing infertility. In the past 24 years IVF has produced 200,000 children in the U.S. These births have occasioned joy and wonder. They have not—at least not till now—provoked moral outrage at the fact that the process entails the creation and destruction of spare embryos.

The IVF process, in which sperm and eggs are joined outside the womb for the purpose of creating embryos and inserting them into the uterus, produces some embryos that are either destroyed in the process, judged to be unhealthy and set aside, frozen indefinitely for future use or intentionally destroyed. Often three or four embryos are implanted in the uterus with the hope that one of them will survive.

Couples can decide whether the remaining embryos are to be frozen for future use, donated to other potential parents or discarded. The result is that about 400,000 embryos are being stored in the U.S., and about 2 percent are set to be discarded.

Do Bush, DeLay and their supporters understand the implications of their claims? Do they aim to challenge or sharply curtail IVF? Do they want to make sure that every embryo created by IVF is implanted? Or is their talk of embryos as “real human lives” an exaggeration for political effect, not intended to shape actual medical practice? We will have to wait and see.

Using embryos that were produced through IVF with the intent of creating new life, but which now are never going to be implanted in a womb, strikes us as a reasonable option for advancing knowledge of stem cells. It is clearly preferable to one of the major alternatives at hand: creating embryos for the sole purpose of using them in research. It is the latter approach, which adopts a purely instrumental view of embryos, that represents the more glaring moral hazard, and the more slippery moral slope.