

## **Human Guinea Pigs?**

### **Ian Wilmut wants to experiment on the dying with embryonic stem cells—even though the treatments haven't been properly tested.**

BY Wesley J. Smith

Ian Wilmut, the creator of Dolly the sheep and newly appointed director of Edinburgh University's Centre for Regenerative Medicine, wants to experiment on dying people with embryonic stem cells—even though he admits that such potential treatments “have not been properly tested.”

Wilmut's plan, which in essence would use people with terminal neurological conditions as lab rats, is the latest example of the dehumanizing impetus that is inherent to embryonic stem-cell research and human cloning. It is also an important story. With the fall of the fraudulent South Korean cloning researcher Woo-Suk Hwang, Wilmut may be the world's premier human cloning researcher. When a scientist of his international stature calls for experimenting on living human beings before such procedures would normally be ethical to perform, it demands our attention.

Conducting medical research on humans is a tricky business. It is not the same thing as providing risky but proven medical treatments, which is done for patients. Medical experimentation is done to test subjects in order to further science. The experimenters may hope to help the subjects, but since the procedures are, by definition, not fully tested, they also have potential to cause great suffering and harm.

According to the Scotsman, Wilmut wants to test embryonic stem cells on subjects with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS (commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease), “who face a steady, slow decline and premature death.” There is no doubt that ALS is a devastating condition. For causes that are not yet known, it inflicts upon its victims a slow physical—but not mental—collapse culminating in total paralysis and eventual death.

ALS patients are often desperate for a cure. But deep yearning and consent are not, under generally accepted standards of medical research, sufficient to justify using dying people as subjects in medical experiments. What is it about stem cells that would compel us to exempt researchers in that field from the usual ethical protocols that apply in all other areas of medical research?

Wilmut claims that an exception should apply in this case because his proposed experiments would be “high risk, but potentially high gain, trials.” But is this really true? Yes and no. There is plenty of risk in ES stem-cell research. But embryonic stem-cell research is nowhere near sufficiently advanced to claim that there are potentially “high gains.” Indeed, animal studies have yet to demonstrate that ES cells would be efficacious in treating neurological diseases such as ALS.

But we do know that ES cells are currently unsafe to try in humans. The biggest problem is tumors. Embryonic stem-cell therapies can cause deadly teratomas, which are lesions made up of several different kinds of tissues. Indeed, mouse experiments which attempted to treat Parkinson's disease with ES cells resulted in a brain tumor-caused death rate of 20 percent. As reported in the medical journal *Neurology*, several years ago Chinese doctors attempted a fetal cell experiment to treat a Parkinson's disease patient. Unfortunately, it appears that the fetal tissue may have been contaminated by early embryonic tissue. The patient died when the ventricles of his brain filled with non-brain tissues such as teeth and hair. Thus, if Wilmut's proposal is accepted, ALS patients who might otherwise live for months or years could instead be killed by an agonizing brain tumor.

Some might say, So what, better to die sooner seeking a cure, no matter how remote the chances, than linger in a helpless condition.

But such attitudes lead off an ethical cliff. Besides, contrary to common belief, ALS patients' lives can be rich and meaningful. People with ALS can be kept comfortable, can be helped to adjust to the wrenching emotional pain caused by their debilitating condition, and with medical and other technologies, can remain totally engaged in life. I have seen it with my own eyes: My friend Bob died of ALS a few years ago. Yes, it was tough. But to the end, he found great joy in his family and lived a fulfilling life by earning money for his family with online investing and starting an art collection. More famously, Stephen Hawking discovered black holes, traveled the world as an international science celebrity, and sired a child after becoming totally paralyzed from ALS.

Embryonic stem-cell research and therapeutic cloning are intensely controversial. Many cures have been promised but none have been delivered—even in animal models. In the wake of the Woo-Suk Hwang therapeutic cloning scandal, people may finally realize that the immediate potential of embryonic stem-cell research has been wildly hyped. On the other hand, adult and umbilical cord blood stem cells are showing promise in early human trials. If Wilmut gets his way, the first human trials with ES cells would make international headlines and reinforce the dubious idea that the future of regenerative medicine lies most importantly with the embryonic procedures.

Even worse, Wilmut's proposal leads to a dangerous moral trap that could result in society looking upon people with catastrophic conditions as usable commodities. And once we've started down that road, why limit it to the dying? People in persistent vegetative states could come to be seen as splendid research subjects.

But dying people are not dead: They are living. And they should be treated as fully equal and included members of the community. Using them in medical experiments that are not ready for human application would dehumanize them. The authorities in the United Kingdom should reject Wilmut's proposal out of hand.

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