

Defence of the foetus deserves a prize

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By Carolyn Moynihan

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Something more important than genetic research was in the press this week: a reminder from an eminent doctor that it's wrong to tear a foetus from the womb.



Newspapers are full of sensational headlines, but the *London Daily Telegraph's* "Don't tear a smiling foetus from the womb" this week was truly extraordinary. For one thing, it wasn't the work of a tabloid editor but of someone in the mainstream -- albeit conservative -- British press. For another, it was not a quote from what the press in general likes to call an "anti-abortionist" but from an [opinion piece](#) by Britain's foremost authority on foetal ultrasound scanning, Professor Stuart Campbell.

If there were a Nobel Prize for honesty in medicine Professor Campbell would be a candidate. While many with similar credentials run for cover on the abortion issue, he is calling for the maximum age for abortions to be cut from 24 weeks gestation to 18 weeks. To some of us this stand may not seem very courageous, but it's too radical for the British Medical Association, whose annual conference voted down a recommendation to reduce the limit from 24

weeks to 20 weeks last year. At the time, Campbell described this as "bizarre" and "barbaric". [And this is why.](#)

For 40 years he has watched images of the unborn child become more and more detailed and lifelike on his ultrasound screen as two-dimensional scanning gave birth to 3-D and then 4-D scanning -- a technique he pioneered in the UK. Two years ago he amazed the nation by [publishing images](#) now available of foetuses as young as 11 weeks yawning and "walking", and at 20-24 weeks seeming to cry, smile and frown. They are pictures, he says now, that have made parents "tremble at the sight of their soon-to-be newborn" and want to "stroke its downy head".

Indeed, they would move anyone with two eyes and a heart, and they have moved Campbell, a father of four, to question his attitude to abortion. While he remains in agreement with "a woman's right to choose", he wants to see that choice limited by the now obvious "signs of humanity" in the unborn child. For this he has been accused of "sentimentality" and, to the extent that his argument rests only on what we can see, it is an accurate charge. (If you can't "see humanity" in a human being is it all right to kill that individual?)

But Campbell also argues from consistency. Premature babies are surviving at younger and younger ages. The UK Abortion Act was changed in 1990 in recognition of this fact, and the maximum age for abortion reduced from 28 weeks to 24. At that stage, a baby born at 23 weeks had less than a 23 per cent chance of survival. Now it has a 66 per cent chance and the law must be changed again.

These extremely premature babies raise another point of consistency, says Campbell. "Babies born at 22 weeks are never treated without analgesics. Why, if there is scientific evidence to prove their brains are too under-developed to feel pain or distress, would they be given medication to protect them from pain?" And if these babies just might feel pain, why not give the benefit of the doubt to those inside the womb? After all, when he gently pushes a baby in the womb at 28 weeks, it will make a crying face because it has been disturbed.

In spite of such uncertainties and inconsistencies, there are 1200 terminations a year between 22 and 24 weeks in the UK (and well over 7000 from 18 weeks and later). The worst of it, in Campbell's view is that 70 per cent of these are for "social" not medical reasons. This is where to focus, he says, in changing the law. "These are healthy babies, not brain-dead, feelingless creatures. When I see a foetus that can smile at me, I know absolutely that we should not tear it from the womb."

Professor Campbell's declaration makes me want to stand up and cheer. Yes, it falls far short of what many of us want in this area. Yes, there are gaps in its logic and that slightly irritating bow to "a woman's right to choose". Judging by an [interview](#) he gave last year, it even falls short of what the man himself would eventually like to see. But this is a bid for the possible, something that the public can see -- and feel -- for themselves is right, and it deserves the support of everyone who wants to turn back the tide of heartless killing that has swept away the lives of countless unborn children in the last four decades.

Earlier this week two United States scientists were awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine on account of their pioneering work in genetics. They had discovered a fundamental mechanism for controlling the flow of genetic information and this may, in time, lead to new treatments for a range of illnesses. They did what scientists are supposed to do: discover the truth and let us know so that we can take it into account.

Professor Campbell through his research and clinical work has confronted the truth about "the secret life of foetuses" and shown us that life in its amazing and moving detail. What is more, he has risked unpopularity by pointing out what that truth demands of a civilised society. Although he has received many accolades during his distinguished career, he may never get a prize for doing exactly that. But he deserves it. He has revealed something much more important for humanity than the secret life of genes.

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