

**THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE**  
19 South LaSalle Street #903  
Chicago, IL 60603  
phone 312/377-4000 · fax 312/377-5000  
<http://www.heartland.org>

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## Emerging Human Embryo Market Poses Moral and Ethical Dilemmas

Author: Michael Arnold Glueck, M.D.  
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What is a human life worth?

For centuries, that question has been asked in the context of the cost of keeping people alive. In recent years, however, it has expanded to include the value of creating people in other than the natural manner--the "businesses" of sperm donation, artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization, and cloning.

Now the issue has broadened yet again. What about the "business"--now a \$3 billion per year trade--of women selling their eggs?

### Eggs for Sale

This new issue involves two major questions. First, what are the long-term effects on a woman who sells her eggs? Let's face it--donating sperm is, as a matter of physiology, a transient thing. Harvesting eggs is not.

Second, should a woman be able to sell her eggs in the same way other people sell their organs, such as kidneys, as a part of her body with which she's free to do as she chooses? Eggs are not kidneys--but neither are they sperm.

"We're not going to know all the effects of women selling their eggs for at least 10 years or more," noted Jane Orient, M.D., executive director of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons. "We don't know the long-term consequences of the powerful drugs and surgery [necessary] to obtain the eggs. How many women are selling their chances of motherhood for a few thousand dollars?"

### 'Designer Babies'

It is one thing to sell eggs to women or couples who can't have children of their own. It is quite another thing altogether to "design" babies.

As science marches on, mankind may reach--or may already have reached--a critical point where the hazards and risks of some new technologies outweigh the benefits.

But new life is already for sale, and a \$3 billion human egg industry booms. There is a new kind of brokerage firm in our new world, agencies that assemble databases of young women and market their eggs to customers who want a baby and can't produce one.

### 'Donor Shopping'

Egg brokers charge around \$16,500 per egg, which includes a fee of \$4,000 or more for the egg donor. A donor must inject herself with fertility drugs every day for six weeks, and a woman who has successfully produced eggs three or four times can receive up to \$8,000.

Some of these agencies offer their customers photographs and information about donors' hobbies, education, and religion, along with health screening, so customers can pick their donor. Other agencies consider "donor shopping" for "designer babies" unethical; they assign a donor on the basis of a few genetic traits.

One recent donor--identified only as "donor 8447"--produced 16 eggs during a single cycle, according to an October 22, 2007 story in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. Some of the embryos that were created were implanted, and some were frozen. "I think it's great," the story quoted her as saying. "Men have always been able to spread their genes. Now I can spread my genes." One wonders when men will begin to demand equal pay for equal DNA.

The outcome of these "miracles for sale" is not always happy. Some clients have held a newborn in their arms and said, "I don't feel attached to my child," according to University of Minnesota psychologist Linda Hammer Burns. In some cases, parents divorcing years after the children are born use the means of their conception as emotional weapons in bitter legal fights, according to the *Star-Tribune*.

### Advancing Understanding

Infertile women who create embryos for freezing tend to view them with much less solicitude than donor 8447.

Anne Drapkin Lyerly of Duke University Medical Center and Ruth R. Faden of the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics wrote last year in *Science* magazine, "Our data suggest that for most of the individuals who create embryos in hopes of having a baby, the preference is not that their remaining embryos have a chance at life, but rather that they be used in a way (research, and if not, simply destruction) that ensures that they do not."

More than half would donate their embryos for research in the belief that "scientific progress justifies the instrumental use of early human life." Only around 20 percent would donate to another couple, suggesting "there are deep responsibilities to one's own embryos." These responsibilities preclude allowing them to develop into children without the knowledge, participation, or love of those who created them.

#### **DNA Roulette**

About 400,000 human embryos are currently cryo-preserved in the United States. This number is expected to increase rapidly as news of egg brokerage houses becomes more widespread. Eventually, someone will ask whether frozen embryos have "rights" even though they are not in a woman's body.

Medicine has continued to create new ethical and moral dilemmas in the name of scientific advancement. Playing genetic DNA roulette entails accepting significant risk--as well as the knowledge that many more risks will not be known until we learn of them the hard way.

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*Michael Arnold Glueck, M.D. ([drglueck@adelphia.net](mailto:drglueck@adelphia.net)) is a visiting fellow in economics and citizenship at the International Trade Education Foundation of the Washington International Trade Council.*