

## Making a Mockery of Scientific Research Ethics

Anyone who understands the scientific fact that human life begins at the moment of conception, and who agrees that human beings have rights, cannot accept as ethical the process of creating human embryos in laboratories with the full knowledge they will die or be killed at either 14 or 28 days. The recently formulated draft recommendations by the International Society for Stem Cell Research set aside this defective standard and propose something even worse: that scientific research on human embryos beyond 14 days and up to 28 days be moved from the “prohibited” category to one that can be authorized after an ethics review.<sup>1</sup> This is a terrible idea. To extend the time scientists do “research and kill” experiments on human embryos makes a mockery of rational bioethical thinking.

What was the origin of the 14-day rule? The impetus for the limit was the birth of the first “test tube baby,” Louise Brown, in 1978. The general public, and scientific and religious leaders, expressed alarm at the specter of technicians artificially conceiving children in labs and “growing” them outside of the wombs of their mothers. At the time, however, it was not technically possible to keep a human embryo alive and developing more than a few days in a laboratory. The Ethics Advisory Board of the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and the infamous Warnock Committee in the United Kingdom, both recommended the 14-day rule for human embryo research.<sup>2</sup> All over the world, with the notable exception of Germany, countries began allowing laboratory experimentation on human embryos in the first two weeks of development. This was deemed a kind of ethical “compromise” between those who objected to any lethal human embryo experimentation and those who had no objections to “embryo destructive” research or the development of artificial wombs. The Church weighed in with condemnations of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) and experimentation on human embryos with the notable instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*.<sup>3</sup>

What follows are basic, common-sense, and necessary points on which confusion prevails in our contemporary society. It has become quite common to refer to the killing of embryos as “destroying” them. This euphemistic language is completely unscientific and grammatically incorrect. One harms or kills a living being and one damages or destroys an inanimate object. A hunter does not destroy a deer, he kills it. A car accident can destroy the vehicle but not kill it. No one can argue scientifically that a human or any other embryo is not a living growing being. Properly speaking, they can be maimed or killed but not destroyed.

So, what is happening today? Scientists, after so many years of lethal research on untold numbers of tiny human beings, are finally capable of artificially gestating these embryos up to or beyond 14 days. According to the perverse logic of “if it can be done, it should be done,” some scientists are now calling for the decades-old 14-day limit to be revised and extended to 28 days.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/03/16/1020879/scientists-14-day-limit-stem-cell-human-embryo-research/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.embopress.org/doi/full/10.15252/emmm.201809437>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19870222\\_respect-for-human-life\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html)

One author put it very bluntly: “The 14-day limit has become limiting and the conversation around extension must continue.<sup>4</sup>”

After all, if it is okay to kill humans in the first two weeks of life, what is so bad about allowing them to live a further two weeks and making sure they die before 29 days have passed?

That such cold-blooded logic actually convinces some individuals and groups is frightening. They lack the most minimal respect for the human rights of our youngest brothers and sisters. Science and humanity do not progress when human lives are sacrificed with no regard for the inherent dignity and right to life of every human being. What is proposed by the International Society for Stem Cell Research takes us one step closer to the gestation of babies in a completely artificial environment, thus making pregnancy optional. Some bizarrely hope that key aspects of the dystopian science fiction of the famous novel “Brave New World” will become a reality.<sup>5</sup>

The good news is that we are still early in the campaign to extend the 14-day rule. There will be broad consultations and high-level discussions. This is an opportunity to express our total rejection of experimentation that injures and kills human embryos. The entire premise that one can ethically justify science that exploits and kills some humans for the possible future benefit of others must be denounced. The National Catholic Bioethics Center will be at the forefront of this struggle to defend the dignity and right to life of human beings from the first moment of conception.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.bionews.org.uk/page\\_154716](https://www.bionews.org.uk/page_154716)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Brave-New-World>