

GM Babies Already Here

Sunday Morning Post

3 December 2023

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If you are holding in your arms something called an “ordinary baby”, revel in the anachronism of it all. Sooner or later, probably sooner, you will not have babies with natural hair or eye colour or bad-tempered slow-growing ones; you will not even have to change diapers regularly. You will ponder and choose the appearance of a genetically modified baby. This “perfect” baby will have great strength. It will sit at one month old, walk at four months old and it will learn to talk when it is three months old. Immunizations will not be necessary.

144 It has all happened so quickly. Just a few years ago scientists embarked somewhat inevitably on what amounted to a controversy surrounding the genetic modification of humans. The pioneers were cautious. Treatments of certain types of infertility and inheritable diseases went on to complement the birth of normal healthy babies. Human Inheritable Genetic Modification (IGM) technology was gingerly introduced to avert the possibility of passing diseases on to children. IGM could be used not only to treat inheritable diseases, but to enhance normal human characteristics such as height, intelligence, eye or hair colour. This could be done, for example, by inserting additional copies of a growth hormone gene to try and attain additional height, or altering how well a gene expresses itself in order to increase memory. The Australian Health Ethics Committee warned the IGM procedure could radically change our attitudes

towards the human person, the nature of human reproduction, and the parent-child relationship. But the comments from medical researchers came back reassuringly: *er, well, parents still like to retain ordinary babies; we will merely solve the problems that parents are facing.* Since then, rapid breakthroughs in genetic research, advances in molecular biology, and new reproductive technologies are throwing new light on genetically inherited diseases.

Then came the reality check. Genetically modified babies took off. The Nobel Prize winning “father” of DNA, James Watson, called for laws to allow genetic engineering of human sperms and eggs. In an article published by *The Independent*, Dr Watson said: “I strongly favour controlling our children’s genetic destinies. Working intelligently and wisely to see that good genes dominate as many lives as possible is the truly moral way for us to proceed.” Dr Watson added that to his knowledge no illness or fatality had been caused by a genetically-manipulated organism and criticised those who feared possible dangers from germline therapy experiments. Aspiring parents held out great hope for choice. An extract from the notable American Association for the Advancement of Science Report said, “one believes one should never put off doing something useful for fear of evil that may ever arrive; superpersons would remain the denizens of

science fiction, not the real world, far into the future”. This unique message was soon spread throughout the developed countries.

So the prediction not so long ago that ordinary babies will no longer exist in ten years’ time no longer seems such a ridiculous proposition. Last year harvesting of stem cells from early-stage human embryos symbolized the beginning of the critical mass phase in Britain. Scientists derived stem cells from human embryos less than 14 days old in research towards new medical cloning. Stem cells are the precursors to the 200 different kinds of cells that make up our bodies. Researchers manipulate these cells into becoming different types of cells. One of the holy grails of stem cell research is “therapeutic cloning” in which a patient’s DNA is used to produce a genetically identical embryo as a source of stem cells which would not be rejected by the patient’s immune system. The result will almost certainly be a universe rather like the emerging American one in which power is dramatically shifted away from the parents and towards the scientists/doctors, changing the way we think for good.

Take ordinary babies, what the ordinary babies you are bringing up essentially represent is a fusion of natural genes from two parents into one physical object. The control of that object belongs to parents. But if you abolish the traditional reproduction, you greatly diminish the natural genes from parents. The scientists, in effect, become the proprietors of GM babies. Cloning humans as the parents decree: parents can choose to skim the elements from genes that are not wanted, retain the good qualities and add extra genes as the parents wish. Parents do not even have to pay a thing as this is covered by the national medical benefits.

Will ordinary babies still endure? Of course they will, in the way that cruise liners survived the 747. They will be appreciated as treasure. But the nerve centre will be elsewhere. Unethical? You bet. A truly global genetic engineering technology will make most governments uncomfortable. There will be perfect generations and unprecedented spreading of intelligence. It is an exhilarating future, exhilarating enough perhaps to compensate for the end of the institution you are now holding in your hands — an ordinary baby. The crying you hear is the cry of the past.

