

Women can still say "no"

Is stem cell science really anti-woman? Can anyone who truly believes in the right of women to be treated as rational citizens deserving of the same rights and opportunities as men campaign against the science on the grounds that women lack the capacity to give informed consent to egg donation?

The answer to both questions is "no".

Yet these are precisely the claims made by Katrina George, the director of Women's Forum Australia (WFA), in her piece last Thursday 2/11/06.

George argued that because advances in stem cell research require women's eggs, women would be pressured to act against their own self-interest and to donate them. Because egg donation is risky, and because women are - quite literally - incapable of saying "no" ,, the only solution to the potential for exploitation is to ban the technology all together.

None of these claims withstand scrutiny.

The aim of embryonic stem cell research is to gain knowledge about pluripotent cells, those capable of becoming any tissue in the body. Scientists are hopeful that such cells will help us develop treatments for currently incurable conditions like motor neuron disease, Alzheimer's and the sorts of spinal cord injuries suffered by the late actor Christopher Reeves. Pluripotent cells may one day allow us to produce blood, and grow organs like hearts and livers that - because they are genetically matched to the patient - will eliminate the need for anti-rejection drugs.

The crux of George's claim is that this research cannot be done without eggs, and this means that women will be coerced into donating them. The solution she proposes is to ban the technologies in Australia, despite her knowledge that stem cell research will continue in places like the UK, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, Finland and Spain.

How will such coercion happen? In a submission opposing the passage of legislation designed to allow Australian scientists greater freedom to pursue stem cell cures, WFA said that if eggs are allowed to be sold, poor women will have no choice but to donate against their will.

A valid claim, except for the fact that the legislation - to be debated in the Senate next week - explicitly prohibits the sale of eggs, sperms or embryos. Those guilty of inducing egg donation by offers of cash, a discount on treatment or even giving priority in the provision of service risk up to 10 years in jail.

Women's Forum Australia also claims that women will be coerced into donating by their desire to be seen as "good women". Their submission says that "social and cultural expectations of feminine self-sacrifice" will lead women to "sacrifice their own interests, and assume the health risks of ova extraction for the sake of others".

In fact, women already donate eggs. In 2003 196 Victorian women gave their eggs to women they knew, although a small number donated to strangers.

Is Women's Forum Australia saying these women didn't really choose to make such donations, but were simply trying to look like "good women" in the eyes of others? If such altruism should be banned when it comes to stem cell science, shouldn't women be prohibited from donating eggs to women facing infertility, too?

Women also donate blood, though this - like all medical procedures - carries risks. Should the state also step in here and say "no"?

How would any of us feel to be told that we cannot donate an egg to a sister suffering infertility or to a stem cell research project attempting to cure a disease from which we, or a beloved child, suffers?

The answer is infantilized, patronized, and mad as hell. If George thinks egg donation is too risky, she has the right to say "no". What she doesn't deserve is the freedom to stop me, or any other women, making my own risk/benefit calculation, and my own choice.

Which takes us back to our first question: is stem cell science anti-woman? The clear answer is "no." Researchers and scientists believe that as long as relevant legal rulings and ethical

guidelines are followed, women have the same ability to give - or withhold - informed consent to being involved as men.

Curiously, the sole source of sexism in the debate comes from groups asserting feminist credentials. Women's Forum Australia describes itself as an "independent thinktank" that promotes "the advancement, well-being and freedom of all women".

The directors of WFA include the "bioethical advisor" to former pro-life Senator Brian Harradine, two women - including George - with links to Opus Dei and a Southern Cross Bioethics Institute (SCBI) staff member. SCBI is the research arm of Southern Cross Care, which is the product of the Knights of the Southern Cross, an order of Catholic men "committed to promoting the Christian way of life throughout Australia".

Defining "independent" is tricky, but there is little doubt that "thinktanks" should do good thinking.

The factual sloppiness and offensively sexist nature of arguments advanced by George don't fit the bill.

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