

WORLD & NATION

Ethicists: Septuplets raise troubling issues

By Carol Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Hidden behind all the hoopla and excitement surrounding the recent births of the Iowa septuplets is an issue that many don't see as black and white — much less pink and blue.

Beyond the sheer amazement of the birth of these seven children is the talk that some of these children might not have been, if the couple had followed their doctor's advice.

The record-making births have been hailed as a miracle by some. They have rallied community and national support and turned the small town of Carlisle, Iowa, into an overnight media circus.

And in nearly every report that talks about Bobbi and Kenny McCaughey and their instantly large family, there has been the mention that the couple, because of their Baptist religious convictions, chose not to "selectively reduce" the number of fetuses.

Stop right there, say Catholic medical ethicists who are concerned with the health-care community's casual usage of this euphemism for abortion.

The McCaugheys were told early in the pregnancy that aborting some of the fetuses would increase the chance of survival for the others.

Bobbi McCaughey, in her first public interview Nov. 21, said she and her husband decided not to abort any of the children because "these are babies. How can you decide that you're going to have this one and you're not going to have that one?"

The advice to the McCaugheys wasn't new. Doctors have long said that the more fetuses a woman carries, the greater health risk to each one. Multiple babies are likely to be born prematurely and run the risk of having cerebral palsy, brain damage, blindness, retardation or developmental problems.

But today, with the increased use of fertility drugs and aggressive fertility treatments, the procedure of "selective reduction" is becoming more commonplace. It's also portrayed as the compassionate thing to do.

"The notion of using technology to help create life and then to use surgery to reduce it, is madness," said Franciscan Father Germain Kopaczynski, director of education at the Pope John Center for the Study of Ethics in Health Care in Boston.

He said the whole idea "shows the schizophrenia our age has that wants children, but not too many, and needs to kill to bring to life."

Dominican Father Patrick Norris, asso-

ciate director for the Center of Health Care Ethics at St. Louis University, said this procedure "sets up a terrific irony. Parents who have been desperate for children have to make a decision to destroy a healthy child."

The decision is an arbitrary one and one that no parent should have to make, both priests pointed out.

"Choosing some humans to die so others might live is putting at human hands a decision that shouldn't be made," said Father Kopaczynski. "It means you're playing God, but unfortunately, we don't play God as God plays God."

Countering the medical advice, Father Norris said, "Logically, you might think you must try to save some (of the children). But the church takes the counter-intuitive approach and says not to do something morally evil. The church says you can never directly kill an innocent person."

Helen Alvare, director of planning and information for the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, pointed out the terrible juxtaposition of "terminating a pregnancy within a pregnancy."

She said a single abortion "denies the humanity and reality of the fetus, but a 'reduction' is affirming the wanting of one life while denying the other."

"Killing something you want because it's in the 'best interest' provides a complete paradigm for our confusion over abortion," she said. "The culture of death and the culture of life are side by side here."

And the fact that so many couples have to come to this dilemma in the first place, raises questions of the ethical use of fertility treatments.

Fathers Norris and Kopaczynski both referred to the 1987 Vatican document, *Donum Vitae* ("The Gift of Life"), which points out that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the use of fertility drugs to help couples conceive as long as they do not go against the unitive and procreative aspects of marriage. But the document calls in vitro fertilization, where conception takes place in a laboratory dish, immoral.

"The document mentions that a child is not an object to which one has a right. And one doesn't therefore have the right to achieve a child at any means," Father Norris told CNS.

Father Kopaczynski said the 10-year-old document foresaw a lot of today's problems caused by fertility treatments, such as the treatment of spare embryos.

"The church was trying to show great love for couples experiencing fertility problems," he said, "but it also wanted to keep the dignity of the child and marriage first and foremost."

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