

WORLD & NATION

Opposition mounts to human embryo cloning

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick of Washington warned Nov. 26 that the reported successful cloning of early-stage human embryos "has dangerous implications" of playing God and devaluing human life.

Scientists of Advanced Cell Technology, a privately held biotechnology firm based in Worcester, Mass., reported Nov. 25 that after more than 70 attempts they recently produced cloned human embryonic cells, two of which divided to four cells or more. It was the first public announcement of human embryonic cloning in the world.

They said they also induced parthenogenesis in not-fully-mature human eggs, getting several to divide for up to five days, reaching the blastocyst stage.

The company's officials say they oppose reproductive human cloning — aimed at producing a baby — and they sought to obtain human embryonic stem cells solely for experiments aimed at eventually turning such cells to therapeutic uses.

Cardinal McCarrick called the report "deeply disturbing" and warned of the "arrogance" of reducing "human beings to mere 'spare parts.'"

"While we must encourage the scientific community to continue cutting-edge research, it must occur within ethical boundaries that respect all human life and the role of God as the creator of that life," the cardinal said.

"The arrogance that leads someone to believe he can take on the role of God and reduce humans to mere 'spare parts' is an arrogance which has dangerous implications that we cannot fully anticipate. ... Even ostensibly good intentions, such as curing disease, may have bad effects, such as the devaluation of human life and all that this implies," he said.

President Bush also condemned the company's actions Nov. 26.

"The use of embryos to clone is wrong," he said in response to a reporter's question at a White House event. "We should not as a society grow life to destroy it. And that's exactly what's taking place."



Michael Cox/CNS

Father Daniel J. Becker, at right holding banner, joins William Cotter, left, and others in a demonstration outside Advanced Cell Technology in Worcester, Mass. Two days of demonstrations by pro-life groups in early August protested the lab's stem-cell research.

Bush added that "to grow an embryo in order to extract a stem cell, in order for that embryo to die, is bad public policy. Not only that, it's morally wrong in my opinion."

The National Right to Life Committee said the new report highlights a need for federal legislation banning all human cloning.

"This corporation is creating human embryos for the sole purpose of killing them and harvesting their cells," NRLC Legislative Director Douglas Johnson said Nov. 25. "Unless Congress acts quickly, this corporation and others will be opening human embryo farms."

In July the House of Representatives approved a bill that would ban all cloning of human beings, including human embryos. The Senate is currently scheduled to vote on such a bill next February or March.

House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, called the first human embryo cloning "a four-alarm wake-up call" to the Senate to act on the House bill.

"Let's be clear. We are in a race to pre-

vent amoral, scientifically suspect tinkering with the miracle and sanctity of life," he said in a statement released Nov. 26.

Also calling for quick Senate action to ban all such cloning were the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, the Christian Legal Society and the Christian Coalition of America.

Advanced Cell Technology first reported its work in the online version of *Scientific American*, a lay science journal.

An embryo is cloned by removing the nucleus from an egg and transferring the nucleus of a stem cell into it. The egg's own nucleus has only half the chromosomes of human body cells and normally receives the other half from fertilization by a sperm. The nucleus of a somatic stem cell — a body cell capable of dividing and producing other body cells — has a full complement of chromosomes.

The company's scientists said they had no success with transfers of adult fibroblasts, stem cells taken from human skin, into enucleated human eggs. But they obtained two dividing embryos when they injected such eggs with cumulus cells —

egg-nurturing cells from the ovary which often remain attached to the egg during ovulation.

"Of the eight eggs we injected with cumulus cells, two divided to form early embryos of four cells — and one progressed to at least six cells — before growth stopped," they reported.

Mature eggs and sperm, or germ cells, have only half the chromosomes of body cells. But the scientists said they used immature eggs, before the chromosomal halving, to induce parthenogenesis, or reproduction without fertilization.

Of 22 human eggs chemically prodded to begin dividing and reproducing, they said, "after five days of growing in culture dishes, six eggs had developed into what appeared to be blastocysts, but none clearly contained the so-called inner cell mass that yields stem cells."

Accompanying the *Scientific American* report on the Advanced Cell Technology research was a sidebar by Ronald M. Green, director of the Ethics Institute at Dartmouth College and chairman of the company's ethics advisory board, discussing the ethical considerations behind the work. It said most advisory board members "did not agree" with the view "that the organism produced in human therapeutic cloning experiments is the equivalent of any ordinary human embryo and merits the same degree of respect and protection."

The sidebar acknowledged that "those who believe that human life begins at conception — and who also regard activated eggs as morally equivalent to human embryos — cannot ethically approve therapeutic cloning research. For them, such research is equivalent to killing a living child in order to harvest its organs for the benefit of others."

Green said most of the board, however, rejected the equivalence to an embryo argument.

"We pointed out that, unlike an embryo, a cloned organism is not the result of fertilization of an egg by a sperm. It is a new type of biological entity never before seen in nature," he wrote.

"Although it possesses some potential for developing into a full human being, this capacity is very limited," he added.

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