



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – January 2008

An Exciting New Future

WITH NO SCIENTIFIC training, I am very wary of commenting on scientific matters: far better to let others more knowledgeable take a lead. But it does seem important, when the Church so often has to question matters of medical ethics, to welcome real scientific breakthroughs which are in harmony with Christian teaching. People always hear us saying 'no': let's make sure they also hear us when we say 'yes'!

The debate on stem cell research has caused quite a bit of worry. On the one hand, many of us are alive and fit because of the wonders of medical progress and research. On the other hand, the use of embryos as 'spare parts' conflicts with the Church's teaching on the sanctity of life. As Professor Neil Scolding, a Catholic neurologist, has said, 'the tiniest human *conceptus* is a human being: it is human; it exists, has being....And because it is a human being, it has moral status, it cannot be simply destroyed'.*

'Direct reprogramming' of adult human cells – a method described in two American scientific papers published in the autumn - is therefore a wonderful breakthrough. We can confidently expect the use of embryonic stem cells to be phased out as scientists and clinicians begin to use adult human cells, available in abundance from human skin. 'Direct reprogramming' of adult human cells produces stem cells known as induced pluripotent state cells (iPSCs). These iPSCs have the properties of human embryonic stem cells and scientists hope that cells like these will lead to new treatments for such diseases as diabetes and Parkinson's.

This is not a second-best solution. The cells are what is called 'patient specific' and do not therefore cause problems for the immune system: they will not be rejected by the immune system of the person from which they were derived. Eggs, embryos, cloning: all of these are avoided. Added to which the technology is relatively cheap and quick. We are not quite into an 'ethics-free' area. One or two projects could be troublesome – if, for instance, someone tried to use the new technology to make babies without any male contribution. But what we seem to have avoided is a scenario where most significant medical progress in the future depended on procedures which were flawed and unethical. As the secular New Year begins, we rejoice that the Holy Spirit is at work revealing the glory of God not least in the wonders of medical science. Awesome!

Wishing you a happy 2008 and assuring you of my prayers

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* 'On the Sidelines of a Culture of Death' in ed. Stanford, *Why I am, Still a Catholic*, London 2005