

Weeding Out the "Unfit" Unborn New Threats From an Old Ideology

TORONTO, NOV. 12, 2005 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- A growing demand for "perfect children" is leading to the elimination of unborn babies with health problems. The Globe and Mail newspaper reported Oct. 28 that the number of children born with cystic fibrosis has fallen sharply in recent years.

According to research published in the Journal of Pediatrics, currently 1 in 3,608 babies born in Canada suffer from cystic fibrosis, compared with 1 in 2,714 before a genetic test for this disease existed. "Our hypothesis," Mary Corey, a senior scientist at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, told the Globe and Mail, "is that pregnancies are being terminated."

The article also noted that testing is set to increase notably. Officials in Ontario are planning to test for 21 metabolic conditions, compared with the two screening tests it now conducts.

Genetic screening is also on the rise in Britain. The London-based Telegraph newspaper reported July 11 that a method of screening embryos for hemophilia has been developed.

British doctors at the Clinical Sciences Center in Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's Hospital have developed a form of pre-implantation diagnosis to test embryos conceived through in vitro fertilization for hemophilia. Previously, embryos could not be tested for hemophilia until they were in the womb, by means of amniocentesis.

And on Aug. 19 the Times reported that a clinic in London had been given permission by the government to screen embryos for a gene that can give rise to retinoblastoma, a form of tumors in the eye. The article noted that the permission broke new ground, because retinoblastoma is rarely fatal. In fact, 95% of cases can normally be successfully treated.

The Times reported that groups defending the rights of embryos criticized the approval. The groups argued that it would lead to the destruction of embryos that might be perfectly healthy, along with others that could go on with a high chance of a normal life once their tumor were treated.

The license to conduct the screening went to Paul Serhal, of University College Hospital. Last year he became the first doctor in Britain permitted to screen embryos for a gene that causes bowel cancer.

A duty to screen

In Australia, meanwhile, controversy over the use of genetic screening to eliminate babies broke out when a bioethicist argued that parents have a moral obligation to use this technology to bear "the best child possible."

The Age newspaper reported June 5 on the comments made by Melbourne-born Julian Savulescu. He is now the head of Oxford University's Uehiro Center for Practical Ethics and is also an ethicist at Melbourne's Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

Savulescu was in Melbourne for the annual dinner of the Australian Society for Medical Research, where he was awarded its medal for 2005.

He also argued in favor of using screening to test for desirable character traits. "I think we've got a reason for using (tests) not just to screen out diseases, but in looking at the kind of characteristics our children are likely to have," he told the Age. He said that traits such as empathy, sympathy and fair-mindedness could create more moral people.

Criticism of Savulescu came from Robert Sparrow, of Monash University's Center for Human Bioethics. In comments published in the Adelaide Advertiser on June 15, Sparrow pointed out that widespread use of screening could lead the way to "eugenics by market forces."

"There'll be large pressure on parents to have perfect babies where what counts as a perfect baby is determined by majority opinion," Sparrow said. "Parents will pretty quickly work out for themselves that unless they have the nice, intelligent, tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed child, their child is going to be less successful in society than other children."

As well, if the birth of children with disabilities becomes perceived as reflecting a choice of the parents, social attitudes could change and become less tolerant toward the disabled.

Sanger's legacy

Support for eugenics has a long history. One of the most influential advocates in modern times was the founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger. A 2005 book, "Margaret Sanger's Eugenic Legacy: The Control of Female Fertility," examined her role and the influence it still has.

The carefully researched book, with 75 pages of notes and bibliography, argues that Sanger (1883-1966) had "a genuine commitment to the eugenic ideology."

Sanger's achievements, observes author Angela Franks, has led many feminists to see her "as a paragon of female achievement against an oppressive order." Many feminists also consider her as a bringer of freedom, the freedom to control female fertility, Franks states.

Yet, Franks queries how this image fits in with someone who participated actively in the eugenics movement and, among other policies, advocated forced sterilization. Sanger's vision of liberation for women "was too severely infected with a mindset of oppressive control to be able to promote true female liberation," Franks argues.

Women's liberation, for Sanger, did not mean the freedom for every woman to decide, freely, the number of children she desired to have. Rather, it meant sexual freedom for the "fit."

The corollary of this vision is that certain classes of people should not be parents and, if they would not embrace this childless state voluntarily, it should be forced upon them. This view persisted throughout Sanger's life and to this end Franks cites from a letter

written by Sanger in 1955.

Controlling women

In the letter Sanger insists that birth control should be used as a restriction "for the betterment of the family and the race." This continues even today, notes Franks, as contraception is still being used to control women.

Sanger's eugenic attitudes have been institutionalized and perpetuated. This is not to say, Franks clarifies, that individual supporters of Planned Parenthood are eugenicists. But there has not been a sufficient reflection and rejection of this heritage of eugenics in organizations devoted to birth control, leading to a "lingering elitist bigotry," the author contends.

"Knowingly or not," Planned Parenthood "continues by its words and actions to perpetuate eugenic beliefs about the poor and about the disabled, albeit modulated to sound more sweetly to contemporary ears," Franks states.

The author also says that she writes her book "as a feminist who fears the ideologically compromised feminism which Sanger bequeathed to America and, due to the great power that population controllers have around the world, to all women."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2270, stipulates that human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. "From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person -- among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life."

In No. 2274 the Catechism asks that the embryo be treated as a person, and defended in its integrity. Prenatal diagnosis is morally licit, the Catechism adds, but only "if it respects the life and integrity of the embryo and the human fetus and is directed toward its safe guarding or healing as an individual." It adds: "[A] diagnosis must not be the equivalent of a death sentence." It makes no exemptions for the sake of producing perfect children.

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