

Clueless

Moral Silliness from Some Spokesmen of Science

Recent months have offered several reminders of the need for a sensible public bioethics to educate not only the general public but also some of the leading spokesmen for American science.

In June, Dr. Maxine Singer, a distinguished and highly respected researcher, and chair of the Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy at the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), testified before the President's Council on Bioethics. When asked by a member of the Council why the NAS panel that prepared a report on human cloning in 2002 did not call for any ethical reflection on the cloning of human embryos for research—an issue of great contention in Congress and elsewhere over the past several years—Singer responded that the panel simply did not see any ethical issue to be addressed. “I think in this particular instance, certainly speaking for me personally, I don't understand what the issue is,” Singer said.

President's Council Chairman Leon Kass then suggested to Singer that she

consult the Council's report on cloning, which laid out a series of arguments on various sides of the question. “I have read the report,” Singer replied, “I did not understand those arguments.”

One can hardly imagine starker evidence of the desperate need to educate the nation's scientists about the moral, social, and ethical concerns their work sometimes arouses.

But the Chairman of the very NAS panel on cloning that Singer was questioned about has offered evidence nearly as stark. According to the July 2003 issue of *Scientific American*, Stanford University researcher Irving Weissman addressed a class of undergraduates this spring, telling them that scientific research should not be constrained by moral views. Weissman conscripted the Hippocratic Oath to his cause, claiming the oath tells doctors: “You shall not as a doctor allow any of your personal ethical, religious, even moral concerns to stand between you and care of the patient.” The oath, of course, says nothing of the sort—what is “do no harm” if not an

ethical obligation?—but Weissman’s larger point is more alarming: nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of potentially beneficial research—and certainly not “ethical, religious, even moral concerns.”

Michael Werner, vice-president for bioethics of the Biotechnology Industry Organization, made a similar case, rather more explicitly, during the same July meeting of the President’s Council on Bioethics at which Singer testified.

One Council member asked Werner about BIO’s opposition to transferring embryos to women’s bodies and allowing them to develop for a time with the aim of then harvesting them for research. “So if there were promising lines of research that would require implantation,” Council member Robert George inquired, “you would not be in favor of pursuing those lines of research?” “Yes, that’s correct,” Werner replied—but then he clarified his “principled” stand out of existence, adding that he believes that as “science advances, ethical thinking advances. We constantly are reexamining our views and our principles.” He concluded: “I don’t know that it’s

appropriate to say that limits on scientific research should stay static over the course of decades as things change.” No permanent principles, no lasting boundaries.

President Bush, who opposes human cloning and embryo research on principled grounds, had an opportunity to take BIO to task on this subject when he addressed the organization’s annual convention in June. The president rightly praised the biotech industry for its role in the war on terror, and in helping to combat hunger and disease worldwide. But given the chance to comment on the moral limits of the quest for health, the president only noted that the moral calling of scientists “requires a deep respect for the value of every life, because even the most noble ends do not justify any means.” A decent, but undeveloped, ideal.

Bioethics exists, presumably, to expand on that principle, and to argue, *pace* Dr. Weissman, that science must be limited by ethical concerns and moral boundaries. But where is the bioethics establishment when that case needs to be brought home to the nation’s leading scientists?