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Scrambled Ethics

Embryonic-stem-cell research exploits egg donors, too.

By Father Thomas Berg

On May 12, my colleagues on the ethics committee of New York's Empire State Stem Cell Board voted overwhelmingly to recommend that state funds be awarded to researchers who have paid women for their "time and burden" in the retrieval of their eggs for research purposes.

If adopted by New York's full stem-cell board, the measure will mimic the long-established practice in the assisted-reproduction industry of paying up to \$10,000 per retrieval. New York would become the first state in the union to allow such reimbursements to eggs-for-research donors.

As if paying women indirectly for their eggs were not shocking enough, New York is anxious to take this issue farther by using state monies to "reimburse" women directly for their egg donations. Several thousand taxpayer dollars would be handed over to any woman who undergoes the dangerous process of egg donation.

Such aggressive monetary reimbursements have been disallowed in most states, including California and Massachusetts, both of which are enthusiastic about stem-cell research. Even the University of Pennsylvania ethicist Arthur Caplan, a pro-cloning advocate, thinks paying women for eggs is a bad idea: "The market in eggs tries to incentivize women to do something they otherwise would not do. Egg sales and egg rebates are not the ethical way to go."

Paying donors is wrong because egg donation entails very serious health risks for women, which can include moderate to serious ovarian hyper-stimulation syndrome (OHSS). This medical condition causes anything from bloating and nausea to loss of fertility, organ failure, and death. And as *Time* magazine recently highlighted, the long-term risks to egg donors are unknown for the simple reason that "they have never actually been studied." Wonder of wonders.

In one of the few studies actually on record, Dr. Jennifer Schneider and Wendy Kramer surveyed 155 egg donors about some of the long-term outcomes from their donation

experience. They found that almost one-third of donors suffered health complications associated with OHSS, and 5 percent suffered subsequent infertility.

It goes without saying that because the long-term risks of egg donation are essentially unknown, the donors' "informed consent" at the time of donation is a joke.

Nonetheless, when looking at the prospect of \$5,000 to \$10,000, most low-income women are not going to care. That's why paying women for eggs will necessarily lead to the undue inducement and consequent exploitation of women. A voluntary donor, by contrast, is much more likely to calmly weigh the pros and cons of donation, and only go through with it if she feels strongly that she is doing good.

It's not surprising that egg-donation agencies across the country are reporting a sharp increase in applicants seeking to donate eggs, as high as 55 percent in some places compared with the same period last year. Is that due to a sharp increase in altruism? I don't think so. "Whenever the employment rate is down, we get more calls." That's what Robin von Halle, president of Alternative Reproductive Resources, a Chicago-based fertility clinic, told the Wall Street Journal last December. "We're even getting men offering up their wives; it's pretty scary," she said.

And by the way: What would those donated eggs be used for? Everything from creating human embryos specifically for research purposes to attempts at human cloning. New York could pave the way for all these practices by making egg donations fundable with state tax dollars. Maybe your state will follow suit.

— *Father Thomas Berg is executive director of the Westchester Institute for Ethics and the Human Person and a member of the ethics committee of New York's Empire State Stem Cell Board.*