



BIOETHICS
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DOUBLE TROUBLE

JUNE 9, 1997

TRANSCRIPT

A presidential blue-ribbon commission recommended a legislative ban on the cloning of human beings because of safety risks and ethical questions and a continued moratorium prohibiting the use of federal money for any research that could lead to cloning for reproductive purposes. It also asked privately-funded researchers to abide by the same moratorium. Charlayne Hunter-Gault reports.

JIM LEHRER: Now, the cloning story and to Charlayne Hunter-Gault.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: It was last February when the dramatic announcement was made of the creation of a cloned sheep named Dolly. Scottish scientists touched off fascination and furor when they told the world about Dolly, the first reported genetic copy of another adult sheep. Shortly after that, President Clinton appointed a national Bioethics advisory commission to review the legal and ethical issue raised by the cloned Dolly. Dolly was the result of 23 years of work by Dr. Ian Wilmut of the Roslin Institute just outside Edinburgh, Scotland. Wilmut's technique was to combine DNA from cells of adult female sheep with unfertilized eggs from other sheep. The resulting embryo was planted into 13 surrogate mother sheep. One became pregnant and delivered Dolly. Shortly after word of Dolly came news from Oregon scientists that they had cloned two Rhesus monkeys, the first successful cloning of primates, animals closely related to humans. Both the Oregon and Scottish scientists said they had no intention of expanding their research to attempt to clone humans, but their announcements immediately touched off a major debate on the prospects and ethics of that possibility anyway. On March 4th, President Clinton imposed a ban on using federal funds for human cloning experiments, warning scientists against--as he put it--trying to play God. He also urged a voluntary moratorium on privately-funded human cloning experiments. In their report, given to President Clinton today, the commission recommended the following: A legislative ban on the cloning of human beings because of safety risks and ethical questions; a continued moratorium prohibiting the use of federal money for any research that could lead to cloning for reproductive purposes; asking privately-funded researchers to abide by the same moratorium. The commission did not prohibit private research on cloning for other purposes, such as cloning genes for medical research or cloning animals. And the commission said it wants to review its findings in three to five years to see what bans may or may not be warranted. At a Rose Garden ceremony this morning President Clinton said he

would send legislation to Congress that prohibits either the public or private sector from using cloning techniques to create a child. He warned about the dangers of human cloning, while acknowledging that the scientific technology involved offered the potential for medical breakthroughs.

PRESIDENT CLINTON: I want to make clear that there is nothing inherently immoral or wrong with these new techniques used for proper purposes. In fact, they hold the promise of revolutionary new medical treatments and life-saving cures to diseases like cystic fibrosis, diabetes, and cancer, better crops and stronger livestock. This legislation, therefore, will not prohibit the use of these techniques to clone DNA in cells, and it will not ban the cloning of animals. What the legislation will do is to reaffirm our most cherished belief about the miracle of human life and the God-given individuality each person possesses. It will ensure that we do not fall prey to the temptation to replicate ourselves at the expense of those beliefs and the lives of innocent children we would produce. Banning human cloning reflects our humanity. It is the right thing to do. Creating a child through this new method calls into question our most fundamental beliefs. It has the potential to threaten the sacred family bonds at the very core of our ideals and our society. At its worst, it could lead to misguided and malevolent attempts to select certain traits, even to create certain kinds of children to make our children objects, rather than cherished individuals.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Here with more is Thomas Murray, a member of the National Bioethics Advisory Commission and chair of its genetics subcommittee. He is professor and director of the Center for Biomedical Ethics at Case Western Reserve University. Professor Murray, why did the commission decide that it was irresponsible and unethical and unprofessional to try to clone a human?

THOMAS MURRAY, Bioethics Advisory Commission: At this time there are ample reasons to worry about any damage that might be done to a child who would be created by cloning.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Like?

THOMAS MURRAY: We know that in the course of a lifetime the DNA in our cells accumulate mutations. In an adult cell, like a skin cell, on your body right now, maybe 10 percent of the genes are actually active. The other 90 percent are effectively put to sleep--we thought permanently. The Wilmot experiment showed that you can actually wake these genes up again apparently, but those genes might well be mutated. They might have changes in them that would be harmless because they're not being used actively in your skin, but if you try to make a baby from those same genes, you might end up with a severely damaged child. We don't know for certain that these various kinds of mechanisms would result in damage to the child born of the technique, but the scientific risks are quite palpable and real, and certainly until they can be put to rest, we have no business trying to make children in this way.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You also said that there were unresolved ethical concerns.

THOMAS MURRAY: Yes. We talked and listened really to a wide variety of Americans. A large number of leader and religious thinkers addressed the commission. Many people spoke to us in public commentary. Many others wrote letters to us. And we also looked at the scholarship on the issue. Most of us--most Americans, that is, seem to feel, as I do, that the issue of cloning, sort of making a child by your design, a child where you've chosen the child's genetic composition at least, beforehand, may be--may be dangerous to what we value about parenthood and may threaten some of the things that we think are most important in the relationship between children and parents may go towards making children objects, rather than beings in their own right to be loved. Such concerns were raised by a number of people who spoke with us.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Now, your remedy was to propose legislation to ban human cloning. Why legislation? Why that route?

THOMAS MURRAY: The federal government could have--by its own rulings--simply have prohibited any public funding of research to make a child by cloning. That was an action the President, in fact, had already taken. That would have no bearing on what went on in the private sector. Currently, around the United States, there are few laws, if any, in the individual states that would prohibit individuals who wanted to try to make a child by this cloning technique from doing so. We felt that federal legislation was the most effective and immediate way to try to discourage that sort of action as well.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: So in other words, wouldn't your legislation--wouldn't apply just to federally funded clinics involved in cloning research but private ones as well?

THOMAS MURRAY: That's the intent--that's what we were intending in our recommendation, and I understand that is what the White House has proposed.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: All right. Well, now some of your critics, including law professors and other ethicists like yourself, argue that the commission ducked the moral question by putting it on the basis of medical safety--medical risk, as you just elaborated.

THOMAS MURRAY: Yeah. Well, what can I say? That's an argument I find very difficult to understand. I think protecting children from harm is a moral argument. All of us think that we shouldn't expose children, even children in--in utero, to harms that might result in damage to them after they're born. And if I did something to a pregnant woman that didn't kill her fetus but horribly damaged it and it was born alive, I couldn't come back to you and say, look, there was no problem here because it wasn't a child when I harmed it. It's a child now, and my action caused it--caused damage to it. I'm morally responsible for it. It would be irresponsible for a scientist to pursue the effort to make a child by this cloning technology until we can be reasonably assured that it would be safe.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Well, what about the pro-life people who argue that by not having a ban even on any kind of research you have effectively sanctioned using embryos that you know are going to be ultimately killed?

THOMAS MURRAY: The commission--

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: And that that's immoral also.

THOMAS MURRAY: I understand. The commission looked at the history of ethical dialogue about research with human embryos. There was a panel at the National Institutes of Health that issues a report in 1994 which was a fairly nuanced analysis of the ethics of research with human embryos. The Congress did not take most of the recommendations of the report, and, instead, it put into the NIH authorization language that said no human embryo research shall be funded by the federal government. The President, in fact, at about the same time said there shall be no creation, no use of federal funds to create embryos for research. Whatever else the Dolly technology is, it's the creation of human embryos for research. So the federal government has already spoken on the issue of the creation of embryos. The commission simply didn't have the time to revisit the whole picture of human embryo research.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Well, what can be done now if this legislation-- under this legislation that you're proposing, and who can do it?

THOMAS MURRAY: It's very important to recognize that cloning, as the term is used by scientists, covers a wide range of things. If we take a single gene from a cell, say a gene that makes the breast cancer gene--the gene that we're now looking at that seems to be related to the risk of breast cancer in women--we wouldn't want to ban research on the gene. We wouldn't want to ban research that cloned individual isolated cells, not persons, not anything that could become a baby, simply a cell. Nor would we want to ban research on animals, including animal embryos, although there are some Americans who would like to stop that, I think most Americans, and the commission was persuaded that that research ought to go forward. So a great deal of research, including a lot of research with value for human health, can go forward immediately tomorrow, as it went forward yesterday.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: But there are also scientists who say that with the ban that you're calling for you are holding back science; that they are things that need to be done that this legislation would prevent.

THOMAS MURRAY: Yes. I'm not persuaded that they're correct about that, although scientists will differ on it. I can tell you that every scientist we had speak with us argued that all of the valuable medical research and basic scientific research that should be done right now could be done with our current techniques and with the use of animal embryos; that we didn't need to provide federal funding to make additional human embryos at this time to pursue the research. But I understand that some scientists don't share that.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: But your ban is only three to five years. Do you think this is so volatile and so undecided that you'd have to revisit it then because some other judgment might be made?

THOMAS MURRAY: We called for a ban, and I gather that the legislation introduced put it at five years. And quite frankly, I'm happy with that for really two

reasons. One is the safety concern. We may know a great deal about that from the animal research in five years, but more importantly, I think, or as importantly, there are some very profound, complex ethical issues that this country needs to grapple with over the next four or five years.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: So you expected debate?

THOMAS MURRAY: We hope the debate will continue and be very lively.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Thank you, Dr. Murray.

THOMAS MURRAY: A pleasure.



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