

Experiments on embryos admitted

by MARGARET MUNRO
Southam News

OTTAWA — There is only one group of Canadian scientists willing to admit it is creating human embryos in the test-tube.

But the team leader is convinced the group is not alone.

"I'm sure there are other people trying it," says Dr. Jacques Emile Rioux, who last year secretly set up a makeshift test-tube baby clinic at Laval University Hospital in Quebec City.

The prospect of such unregulated, independent experimentation fuels growing concern among religious leaders, legal experts and some scientists who see an urgent need for Canadians to deal with the enormous ethical issues involved in tinkering with human life.

The genetic adviser for the United Church is so worried he would like to see a national moratorium on the experiments so the issues can be sorted out before the scientists get any further along with the test-tube baby clinics.

The Quebec City group has tried unsuccessfully to impregnate about 12 women and soon hopes to be inserting embryos into three or four women a week. Rioux says he had hoped the first news of their activities would be in the form of a successful pregnancy.

The team has "not received a penny for the project" but was driven by the desire to create a test-tube baby. One of the scientists in the group had perfected the technique in cats and rabbits for an Agriculture Canada project, and last year the team decided to put its wits and equipment together and move on to human experiments.

The university's ethics committee was told of the experiments and agreed to keep the closely-guarded secret only to have word leak out.

"And you see what happens," Rioux said in a telephone interview. "Now I have to spend 15 minutes talking to you."

Rioux is echoed by biotechnology advisers for the Law Reform Commission of Canada, who see an urgent need to find out how much independent work is going on in Canada, when he says he is convinced there are other groups quietly conducting similar experiments.

No one is, however, pointing fingers.

"People are being very closed-mouthed about it," agrees Dr. Albert Yuzpe, who works on the team planning a clinic at the University of Western Ontario.

"It could get totally out of hand," he says, pointing to all the groups that said they were anxious to start human fertilization clinics after last week's birth of test-tube twins in Oakville, Ont. "There has got to be some degree of sanity added to all this."

Oakville's test-tube mother, Kit Rankin, flew to Britain to the clinic of Dr. Edward Steptoe to have fertilized eggs implanted in her womb. At least eight Canadian research teams are studying the techniques in animals and soon hope to start work on the couples lining up at their laboratory doors.

In Vancouver, for example, a group led by Dr. Betty Poland is exploring the possibilities, as are Dr. David Armstrong in London, Ont. and Dr. Jack Shuber in Toronto. The groups have been sending a steady stream of scientists to Australia to learn the human fertilization tricks in a country where the test-tube baby business is booming. But they insist they have yet to start work on humans here.

Before they get any further, people such as the chairman of the United Church committee on ethics in genetics want society to carefully examine the implications of what the scientists are getting into.

Dr. Ernest Best feels a temporary moratorium on the experiments would give society time to sort out the complex issues.

"Leaving it to the professional societies to decide or to the churches or the political groups isn't enough," says Best.

Yuzpe agrees more public and political participation is needed. As a start he says a conference is being planned for this fall.



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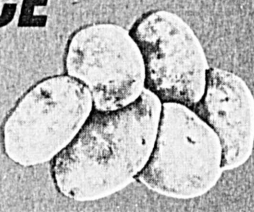
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