

Dr Clifford Grobstein's new book discusses the issue of invitro fertilization

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In July 1978, a woman in England gave birth to a child and ushered in an era of bioethical controversy which may last until the 21st century.

For the first time in human history an ovum had been successfully fertilized in a laboratory and reimplanted in the mother's uterus. The event marked a milestone in reproductive technology but raised a host of moral, legal and ethical questions which may take years to resolve.

The issue of in vitro fertilization, as the technique is sometimes called, is discussed in a new book by University of California, San Diego biologist Dr. Clifford Grobstein titled: "From Chance to Purpose: An Appraisal of External Human Fertilization." It was just published by Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.

Childless couples, unable to conceive for medical reasons, could take new hope at the prospect of one day having a child of their own. But while some may hail the technique as another breakthrough in medical technology, others are fearful it is simply another ominous step toward a "Brave New World" where babies are cloned in test tubes on factory assembly lines.

Grobstein, a former dean of the UC San Diego School of Medicine and currently on the faculty of the Science, Technology and Public Affairs Program, describes how in vitro fertilization works, the risks and benefits of the procedure as they are currently understood, and the concerns raised for the future of humanity.

"Options are now on the horizon that may incorporate human purpose directly into human progression," Grobstein writes. "In the past we made many choices without awareness or concern about hereditary and evolutionary consequences. Today, certain choices are being presented for which we can no longer shift responsibility, whether to Divinity, Chance, or Unkind Fate.

"We are acquiring options to intervene deliberately and purposefully in fundamental matters that hitherto were beyond our control," he continues. "We are moving from unconscious cultural determination of human biological progression to a degree of conscious self-determination."

Any list of controversial issues raised by in vitro fertilization would be a lengthy one but some of the more immediate ones might include: safety factors of the process for the mother and the unborn child, moral and legal questions about who is entitled to undergo the procedure, religious concerns regarding the "unnaturalness" of external fertilization, and worries about its potential for genetic engineering or cloning.

As one possible solution to these difficult issues, Grobstein suggests the creation of a Special Presidential Commission on Human Heredity and Development.

"The Commission might have some 15 members, ten selected for their expertise and five for their high public standing and sensitivity to public attitudes," Grobstein says.

"The charge to the Commission should be (1) to review and monitor scientific and technological advances that may lead to hereditary or developmental human interventions; and (2) to make such recommendations as are deemed appropriate for policy with respect to these possible interventions."

Grobstein also suggests that the Commission carry out studies, hold ongoing public hearings and make yearly reports about their findings.

Grobstein, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, served as chairman of the biology department at Stanford University for two years before coming to UC San Diego in 1965. In 1967, he was named as dean of the new School of Medicine, a post he held until 1973. He is currently professor of biological science and public policy.

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