

6/15/2010

Letter to the editor:

Donation versus adoption: The debate over embryo status

While adoption of children has been an accepted tradition in society throughout history, in contrast, the donation of surplus embryos is a relatively new option and one that is inciting debate in the medical community. At issue is the use of the legal term “embryo adoption” rather than “embryo donation”. Through a process called cryopreservation or embryo freezing, excess embryos from in vitro fertilization are stored for future use. When genetic parents elect to not use the remaining embryos, rather than destroy or donate them to science, they may chose to donate their embryos to infertile patients. It is estimated that 500,000 embryos are currently cryopreserved in the United States alone.

A recent report by The Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) strongly supports the use of the term “embryo donation” over “embryo adoption” stating that while embryos deserve special respect, they are not afforded the same status as persons. ASRM believes that adoption refers to a specific legal procedure, regulated by the State that transfers parentage of existing children. Recent critics of the Ethics Committee report argue that legal adoption should be redefined to include “embryo adoption”.

While the terms “embryo adoption” and “embryo donation” are often used interchangeably, there are real differences between the two. Adoptions involve live children and using “embryo adoption” is a subtle attempt to confer personhood to the embryo. The slippery slope of using the term “embryo adoption” is indeed quite steep and could have ramifications well beyond the IVF world involving legal, ethical and judicial implications. The term “embryo donation” is not only correct but better protects recipient parents and those facilities that have dedicated their lives to creating families.

Sincerely,

Craig R. Sweet, M.D.

Reproductive Endocrinology & Infertility Specialist

Medical Director, Specialists in Reproductive Medicine and Surgery, P.A.

Medical Director, Embryo Donation International

(Dr. Sweet's detailed response to the ASRM criticism is available at www.dreamababy.com.)