

Let's legalise cloning

In many countries, including the UK, human reproductive cloning – creating a baby from the genetic material of a single adult – is a criminal offence. This is not generally seen as controversial: scientific societies, medical groups and governments around the world have condemned the idea of human cloning since the technique was first demonstrated in mammals in 1997.

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But why are we so against the idea of cloned human babies? As a bioethicist specialising in reproductive issues, I believe it has more to do with an irrational fear of cloning than any logical reason. All the arguments in favour of a ban describe risks that we accept quite easily and naturally in other areas of reproduction.

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One argument against human cloning is the idea that it is morally wrong or undesirable to create replicas of people. But although a clone has the same gene set as the adult from which it was cloned, environmental factors will ensure that the resulting individual is not an identical copy, either psychologically or physically. What's more, we accept genetically identical people in the form of twins. If anything, clones would be less alike than twins because they would be different ages and be brought up in different contexts. Objecting to cloning on these grounds makes no sense.

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Another key concern is safety. We know from animal cloning studies that the risks to the mother and baby are likely to be very high, although they may diminish as the technique is perfected. Yet in other areas of reproduction (or life in general) safety alone is not seen as sufficient grounds to make something illegal. The risks should be explained to the prospective mother, and she should then have the right to decide for herself, as with any other medical procedure, whether to accept them.

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The potential baby, of course, cannot give consent. There may be an increased risk of miscarriage or being born with a deformity, but for people born as a result of cloning, it is their only chance of life. Cloning is therefore not a risk but an opportunity. If you could only have been born as a clone, would you have wanted your life to have been prevented?

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We accept this principle for other types of reproduction. Of embryos produced normally, 75 per cent do not make it to birth. Nor do we ban couples who carry disease genes from reproducing, even though their children have a high risk of suffering from a serious disorder – 25 per cent for cystic fibrosis, for example. Many such couples choose not to have a child, or to have their embryos screened, but it's their choice.

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Let's address also the idea that legalising cloning would allow fertility clinics to exploit desperate couples. The possibility of exploitation is not seen as a reason to make other forms of assisted reproduction illegal. Instead, we regulate clinics to make sure that patients are told the risks, so they can make their own informed decisions.

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If someone was cloned without their consent that would be unethical and should be illegal, but it is not a reasonable objection to cloning any more than rape is an objection to sex.

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Other arguments in favour of banning cloning are more outlandish, such as the idea that it might alter the gene pool, or that despotic leaders might use cloning to create armies of ideal soldiers. These are red herrings. If cloning were legalised it is likely only a tiny percentage of people would take it up. After all, sexual reproduction remains cheaper, safer and more fun: only those with no other option are likely to resort to cloning.

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In a free society, actions should be legal unless there is a case for making them illegal. It should be for those who want cloning to remain a crime to justify themselves.

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The trouble with the arguments given in favour of a ban is that when we look closely, they turn out to be irrational and inconsistent. They describe risks that we accept – and are right to accept – in other methods of reproduction. Let us act rationally and legalise human cloning now. 11

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