

AlbertMohler.com

Panos Zavos Strikes Again—Are Clones on the Way?

Dr. Panos Zavos is in the headlines again—this time claiming to have successfully implanted a cloned human embryo into a woman's womb. Once again, Zavos has made this claim without providing even a shred of evidence, but at least some respectable scientists believe his claim may be credible.

Friday, January 23, 2004

Dr. Panos Zavos is in the headlines again—this time claiming to have successfully implanted a cloned human embryo into a woman's womb. Once again, Zavos has made this claim without providing even a shred of evidence, but at least some respectable scientists believe his claim may be credible.

The response to Zavos' claim has been resounding condemnation. Zavos made his announcement in London, speaking to a press conference drawn by the controversy. Professor Richard Gardner of Britain's Royal Society of Medicine reacted sharply: "To embark on human cloning at this stage . . . just seems to me quite astoundingly irresponsible." Professor Arne Sunde, Chairman of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology, echoed professor Gardner's comment, adding, "It is totally irresponsible and unethical to attempt human reproductive cloning. Apart from the ethical objections, which are serious enough, there are major practical problems, not least of which is the high chance of abnormal babies—even if those abnormalities are not apparent at birth."

Zavos is no stranger to controversy. His andrology laboratory—based in Lexington, Kentucky—has provided the platform for his research and publicity. Once affiliated with the University of Kentucky, Zavos is now working as an independent researcher, conducting his "research" outside the bounds of established scientific ethics and oversight. Though many assume him to be a medical doctor, he is actually a physiologist who specializes in fertility technologies.

For several years, Zavos was involved in an infamous collaboration with Italian gynecologist Severino Antinori, who successfully used in vitro technology to assist a 62-year-old woman to bear a child. Zavos and Antinori were once involved in a joint effort to produce the first successful human clone, though that partnership ended in an acrimonious split.

In 2001, Zavos and Antinori announced that human cloning was imminent: "The genie is out of the bottle. Dolly is here, and we are next." The reference to Dolly pointed to the sheep successfully cloned by Professor Ian Wilmut in Scotland back in 1997. Zavos and other zealous advocates of human cloning jumped immediately from Wilmut's success with "Dolly" to announcements that human cloning would be the next step in the reproductive revolution.

Back in 2002, Zavos had claimed to have created the world's first cloned embryo, promising to oversee a successful gestation and birth by the end of 2003. As Zavos announced, "This is all about creating healthy children for childless people. It doesn't bother me at all that people can't accept it—they really ought to."

Zavos has steadfastly defended his experiments in human cloning by claiming, "I am simply doing this to help my patients and to give them the child that they long for." Zavos has not explained why his previous announcement was not followed by the presentation of a successfully cloned human child. Last week's announcement seems to reset Zavos' clock for a successful clone—or at least his boasting.

Panos Zavos represents the dark side of reproductive science. He operates in the shady world of hidden laboratories and undocumented research. His experiments in human reproductive cloning would be illegal in the United States and Europe. Nevertheless, Zavos has pressed on with his outlaw experiments through off-shore laboratories—reportedly

located in the Middle East. A native of Cyprus, Zavos has spread the tentacles of his medical experimentation all around the world.

Even in the context of rampant moral confusion, the scientific establishment has universally condemned the very concept of human reproductive cloning. Some condemn any experiments on human clones because of the inherent immorality of clonal technology when applied to human beings. Others point to the high risks involved in all clonal experimentation, and warn that such risks would include a very high percentage of damaged and destroyed human embryos—not to mention genetic diseases that would likely produce gruesome consequences.

Though various scientists have achieved limited success in the cloning of various mammals, no clonal technology has yet produced a predictable and efficient cloning application. Dolly, the world's first cloned mammal, died prematurely due to advanced genetic aging. Other cloned animals, including cows, monkeys, and mice, have produced astoundingly high rates of genetic deformities and premature death.

Human cloning presents an altogether more troubling ethical challenge—with a much higher moral risk and a significantly greater chance for genetic injury. Many scientists doubt that human cloning will ever be successfully accomplished, given the complexity of the human genetic code and the sophisticated nature of the gestation process. In any event, the very concept of experimentation in human cloning breaks the most significant principle of medical ethics as established in the Hippocratic Oath: “First, do no harm.”

Even those who doubt Zavos' claims are appalled by his ambition. As Richard Nicholson, editor of the *Bulletin of Medical Ethics*, commented: “As he has never communicated through the normal scientific channels of the important journals, I think we have to treat anything he says with a great deal of skepticism. If by chance an embryo went to term, it would likely be substantially damaged. I hope to heaven that he hasn't done this—it is such an irresponsible path for any researcher to be going down.”

In another announcement, Zavos declared plans to offer an embryo-splitting procedure which would create IVF twins out of a single embryo, and then use one of the embryos as a source of spare body parts for the other, should any future need arise. As reported in *The Guardian*, Zavos, joined by British gynecologist Paul Rainsbury, intends to freeze one of the embryos as an option for future medical treatment as might be needed by its living sibling. As he explained, “The organs and spare part tissue would be grown in the laboratory from stem cells—unprogrammed ‘master’ cells—taken from the embryo.” Robin Lovell Badge of the National Institute for Medical Research condemned both the logic and application of this technology: “He is merely preying on people's fears. Firstly he preys on the fears of infertile couples that they will never have children. Secondly he preys on the fears of those who do conceive that their children will have health problems that could be solved by the splitting of embryos—without explaining that implanting half an embryo would dramatically reduce their chances of having a healthy baby in the first place.” As Jo Revill, health editor of *The Observer*, explained, “The central obstacle is that during the development of a cloned embryo the genetic material which is parceled up as a cell splits in two. The cells end up with too much or too little DNA and cannot survive for long. There are also fears that any woman who chose to be a surrogate might be put at risk as a result of the untried procedure.”

Panos Zavos represents the joining together of medicine without ethics and unbridled personal ambition. His personal website brags about Zavos' ambition of “being first.” The site provides a long list of supposed “firsts” Zavos has achieved. “Dr. Zavos has been a true pioneer! He has had a long career as a world renowned authority in human reproduction, and is the chief scientist of the development of numerous new and innovative ideas and technologies in the human reproductive area with worldwide implications.”

Working through his offshore laboratories and outside the reach of Western law and medical authorities, Zavos and his colleagues are medical renegades, completely unconcerned with the ethical principles of the civilized world.

According to the website of his fertility clinic, known as the “Andrology Institute of America,” Zavos “was awarded the first ever Honorary Professorship by the Chinese Academy of Science to an American.” That is a fitting “award” for Zavos to cite, for the Chinese government is one of the world's chief sponsors of outlaw medicine and immoral medical experimentation. The Chinese have been involved in the sale of donor organs, have used organs retrieved from executed prisoners, and infamously make abortion a matter of state-sponsored mandatory population control. No doubt, Panos Zavos and the Chinese Academy of Science deserve each other.

In post-Christian America, Panos Zavos stands as a warning of what is to come. As the basic moral structure of Western civilization falls and as unbridled ambition is given access to limitless technology, moral disaster is sure to follow.

Panos Zavos may or may not produce a cloned human embryo—much less bring a cloned embryo to birth. Nevertheless, his announcement should be a wake-up call as civilization stands on the brink of moral catastrophe.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.