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The Fetus as Organ Factory — The Next Moral Frontier?

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“Buckle up. We’re on our way.” So wrote William Saletan, one of the most influential reporters covering today’s medical and moral controversies. Saletan writes for [Slate.com](#), and his words made reference to the fact that our world just got a little more complicated . . . and a lot more dangerous.

From London, the [Daily Mail](#) reported late last week that [Oxford Professor Sir Richard Gardner](#) now proposes that organ tissues from aborted fetuses might represent “at least a temporary solution” to the shortage of available organs for transplant.

As the [Daily Mail](#) reported:

Kidneys and livers from aborted fetuses could be given to the desperately ill and ease the organ donor shortage, a leading scientist has claimed.

Professor Sir Richard Gardner, an Oxford University stem cell expert, said foetal tissues may offer a more realistic solution to the lack of organs than other technologies being developed.

Further:

Calling for studies into the feasibility of transplanting foetal organs, Sir Richard, an advisor to Britain’s fertility watchdog and the Royal Society, said he was surprised the possibility had not been considered, and that experiments in mice have shown that foetal kidneys grow extremely quickly when transplanted to adult animals.

Sir Richard said: ‘It is probably a more realistic technique in dealing with the shortage of kidney donors than others.’

Just days after President Barack Obama reversed the Bush administration’s policy limiting federal funding for human embryonic stem cell research, this macabre and horrifying proposal emerged in Great Britain. Speaking to a conference sponsored by the [Oxford International Biomedical Centre](#), Professor Gardner was ostensibly speaking as an expert on stem cell research. Indeed the conference, “[New Body Parts for Old: Stem Cells and Regenerative Medicine](#),” was itself ostensibly about embryonic stem cell research. Unexpectedly, Professor Gardner pushed the discussion to the next level.

Gardner’s proposal is to use kidney and liver tissues obtained from aborted fetuses in order to treat organ failure in patients. Indeed, Professor Gardner’s suggestion went further. He argued that fetal organs could be transplanted into adults. Experiments in mice, he said, indicate that these organs “grow extremely quickly.”

This is about as scary as the news can get. Here we confront a serious proposal to use aborted fetuses as factories for spare organs and tissues. Having commodified the human embryo and then allowing its destruction in the name of medical progress, the fetus is next in line.

Professor Stuart Campbell affirmed Gardner’s proposal, adding that, if fetuses are going to be aborted, “it is a shame to



waste their organs.”

In other words, it is just fine to waste their lives and destroy their human dignity, but it is not fine to “waste their organs.”

Professor Campbell’s moral compass came into clear focus when he quipped: “I am sure very few of those on the transplant list would rather die than accept an organ from an aborted foetus.”

That may be so, but no morally sane person can deny that the use of some organs would be morally abhorrent. What about the use of organs taken from executed criminals in China? Is it “a shame to waste their organs?” What about allowing the open sale of organs for transplant? Professor Campbell’s statement seems to put the fetus in a most vulnerable position.

Of course, these fetuses are already dead. They were terminated by elective abortion — killed, in the main, because they were unwanted inconveniences. These fetal human beings are now to be used as sources for organs and tissues?

William Saletan understands the issue. “Two arguments have persuaded the United States to fund stem-cell research using destroyed embryos,” he explains. “One is that the research will save lives. The other is that the embryos, left over from fertility treatments, will otherwise be wasted.” Now, “Both arguments are now being applied to fetuses.”

He is exactly right — the argument for the use of human embryos in medical research is precisely the argument for using fetuses as well. If anything, medical technologies would benefit from the availability of fetal tissues long before uses are derived from research on the embryonic stem cells. And as for waste, you can hear the arguments forming. Why waste these wonderful tissues? After all, they could save lives.

After reviewing the structure of the argument used to promote and justify the use of human embryos in research, Saletan asks: “Why isn’t the same true of research on fetuses?”

Human dignity rests on an eroding foundation in terms of secular argument. We can see human dignity as it is more and more endangered with every passing proposal like Professor Gardner’s. The use of fetal tissues in medical research is grossly immoral — but so is the use of human embryos.

As many of us have been warning for some time, the denial of human dignity in the name of medical research will not stop with the embryo. We just didn’t expect confirmation of this warning so fast on the heels of President Obama’s stem cell announcement. How long will it take until we see another press conference at some future date, with a future president using President Obama’s very words to announce the legal use of fetal tissues? As we sow, so shall we reap.

