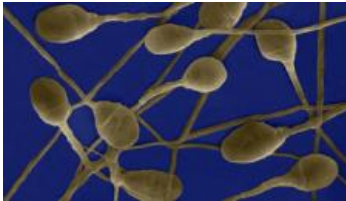


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The Disappearing Father

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Is the notion of fatherhood becoming obsolete? Researchers at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in Great Britain say they are on the verge of creating sperm cells from bone marrow. This would allow women to conceive children completely without men.

In essence, this technological development would render men obsolete and completely unnecessary in the process of breeding babies. This is the ultimate feminist and lesbian dream — men completely out of the picture.

This technology may never actually emerge from the laboratory, though there is no real reason to believe that it is impossible. The British researchers are continuing their work and claim that the experiments are ethical “so long as it’s safe.”

Meanwhile, Kay S. Hymowitz argues that an existing technology, widely used in the United States, is already redefining the family — artificial insemination (or “AI”).

In “[The Incredible Shrinking Father](#),” published in the current issue of *City Journal*, Hymowitz explains that our culture is fast moving to recognize a class of persons who never existed before — children without fathers.

As she observes:

[A]ided by a lucrative sperm-bank service industry, an increasingly unmarried consumer base, a legal profession and judiciary geared toward seeing relationships through a contractual lens, and a growing cultural preference for individual choice without limits, AI is advancing a cause once celebrated only in the most obscure radical journals: the dad-free family. There are multiple ironies in this unfolding revolution, not least that the technology that allows women to have a family without men promotes the very male carelessness that leads a lot of women to become single mothers in the first place. And fatherless families are a delicate proposition, as AI families are discovering, since all the scientists’ technology and all the lawyerly contracts can’t take human nature out of human reproduction.

The background to this development is very interesting. Hymowitz is correct in arguing that early advocates of artificial insemination had no intention of redefining the family. Their only interest was in allowing couples to have children. But, as Hymowitz also observes, this approach was both short-lived and naive. “From today’s vantage point,” she explains, “the approach seems typical of a time too enamored of family secrets and overly cowed by medical authority. Yet if the mid-century approach to artificial insemination was excessively protective of the feelings of infertile men and failed to grasp that family secrets have a way of unraveling rather messily, it also recognized, as did the culture at large, that a child needs both clarity and an intact home.”

Since then, technological, moral, and social developments have transformed the picture. Commercial sperm banks added a huge profit motive to the equation and market economics drove an expansion of available services. On the moral front, the massive transformation of sexual ethics further decoupled reproduction from heterosexual marriage. Social and legal shifts also added momentum, leading to what Hymowitz calls “artificial insemination’s almost entirely unregulated march into the mainstream of American life.”

The biggest issue is what Hymowitz identifies as the “unmarriage revolution.” Even in the 1970s, some lesbians were

turning to artificial insemination in an effort to have babies, but this was usually without the service of a doctor or a sperm bank. Today, the picture is quite different:

Now they're more likely to go to the sperm store like everyone else, especially since a 2006 American Society for Reproductive Medicine Ethics Committee report calling for equal access to fertility treatment for gays, lesbians, and singles. These days, anyone can buy sperm: married couples, gay couples, and single women; women on the AARP mailing list, women barely out of college, 40-year-old women who have tried desperately to find husbands and have no other hope of becoming mothers, and 20-something women who—well—just want to, that's all; rich and famous women like Annie Leibovitz, Wendy Wasserstein, and Mary Cheney; and divorced third-grade teachers who live in modest two-bedroom condos and are fed up with men. Whoever. The California Cryobank, the country's largest, estimates that about 40 percent of its customers are unmarried women. The Sperm Bank of California says that two-thirds of its clientele are lesbian couples. Most professionals believe that about 1 million American children are the progeny of sperm donors—the large majority of them anonymous—with 30,000 more boosting the ranks each year.

The courts have generally made a mess of the questions surrounding AI, and those questions are truly important. As Hymowitz explains, “In unwitting alliance with a fertility industry fiercely protective of anonymous gamete donation, the courts have given their imprimatur to two nonsensical biological conditions: children who have no fathers and fathers who have no children. The old Uniform Parentage Act had it that a donor had no paternal standing, because at the time the law needed to resolve the potential problem of *two* fathers: the donor and the mother's husband. It should be obvious that in the case of a single or lesbian mother, the problem is quite different: there is no ‘other father.’”

The legal questions surrounding artificial insemination are constantly increasing. Consider these:

Can a sperm donor be a father? Can his mother be a grandmother? Can a child conceived through AI inherit property from her biological father? Can a child have two mothers and no father? How about two mothers and a father? Can the lesbian partner of a biological mother have custody rights if the couple breaks up? Can she be required to pay child support? And, again, who are the grandparents?

The courts have no mechanism or tradition of reasoning that is up to the task of answering these questions — largely because these questions would never have made sense in the past. So now we have courts ruling that children have no fathers, multiple parents, two mothers, two mothers and a father, and so on. It should be no surprise that sociologist Amy Agigian would argue that artificial insemination, while originally intended to support the traditional family, would end up undermining the very notion of a traditional family.

Hymowitz's article deals with issues most families never discuss around the dinner table, but this is hardly an issue intelligent Christians can ignore. As with so many other reproductive issues, evangelical Christians have been in the habit of assuming that a technology like artificial insemination is basically benign. By now it should be obvious that this is a misplaced confidence. Artificial insemination, largely because of its widespread availability and unregulated commerce, is redefining marriage, paternity, and family right before our eyes.

Furthermore, Hymowitz observes that many European countries such as Switzerland, Britain, the Netherlands, France, Iceland, and Norway have placed significant restrictions on artificial insemination . . . but not the United States.

As she concludes:

It would be a good idea for Americans likewise to abolish anonymous sperm donation. But let's not kid ourselves that such a ban would also put an end either to fatherlessness or to male fecklessness, both nourished by our cultural predilection for individual choice unconstrained by tradition, the needs of children, or nature itself. To modify that preference, we'll need something much more radical than government regulation.

Something more radical indeed. In fact, nothing less than a reversal of current moral and social trends would be necessary. If left unchecked, these trends will mean something radically new in the human experience — the complete disappearance of the father from the picture. Never there . . . not even missed.

Those wondering what this new picture might look like should see “[Our Sons Don't Need a Father!](#),” an article

published in the May 18, 2007 edition of Britain's *Daily Mail*. In the article, a lesbian couple defies the notion that children — even boys — need a father:

“While there will always be some people critical of what we have done, we feel there is nothing any dad could give our sons that we can't give them,” says Anna, who the twins refer to as ‘Mummy’. Her partner is known as ‘Mummy Jane’.

“We are not man-haters - we have many male friends. But we can kick a football like anyone else, and we will cheer our sons on from the touchline as well as any father.”

But does this doubling of roles - parenthood, rather than ‘motherhood’ and ‘fatherhood’, really work? What sort of future lies ahead for these little boys, who are so far - some would say blissfully - unaware of the way in which they were brought into the world?

Jane and Anna claim friends and family are thrilled for them and that no one “bats an eyelid” about their unusual family set-up.

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