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Human Dignity Under Assault — Embryo Screening Goes Mainstream

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A major survey of U.S. fertility clinics released Wednesday indicates that almost half of the clinics allow couples to choose the sex of a child. As reported in *The Washington Post*, “Sex selection without any medical reason to warrant it was performed in about 9 percent of all embryo screenings last year, the survey found.”

Further:

Another controversial procedure — helping parents conceive a child who could supply compatible cord blood to treat an older sibling with a grave illness — was offered by 23 percent of clinics, although only 1 percent of screenings were for that purpose in 2005.

The survey was published online by the journal *Fertility and Sterility* [access to subscribers only].

In a remarkable statement, one fertility clinic operator said that most embryo screening procedures are done “for the right reasons” — meaning for diseases. “There are thousands of babies born now that we know are going to be free of lethal and/or devastating genetic diseases. That’s a good thing,” said Dr. William Gibbons of Baton Rouge, La. The destruction of human embryos deemed unacceptable is simply affirmed as a “good thing.”

When it comes to sex selection procedures, some ethicists like Arthur Caplan of the University of Pennsylvania suggest that “family balancing” might be “morally persuasive” but a choice not to have either any boys or girls “is troubling.”

Meanwhile, another fertility clinic operator retorted: “It performs a much desired service. We’re making people happy.” The only issues of interest to this doctor were desire and happiness.

Then, consider this section of the report:

However, the survey findings also confirm many ethicists’ fears that Americans increasingly are seeking “designer babies” not just free of medical defects but also possessing certain desirable traits.

“That’s a big problem if that’s true,” Boston University ethicist George Annas said of the sex selection finding. “This is not a risk-free technique,” he said referring to in vitro fertilization, which can over-stimulate a woman’s ovaries and bring the risk of multiple births.

“I don’t think a physician can justify doing that to a patient” for sex selection alone, Annas said.

Note carefully that Dr. Annas sees an ethical issue here — but only as related to a health risk to the mother. The embryo is simply left out of the moral equation. That silence is deafening.

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