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Another Glimpse of the Brave New World?

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The Guardian [London] reports that researchers at Britain's Sheffield University are working on the possibility that artificial human sperm and eggs could be obtained from embryonic stem cells, ultimately allowing lesbian and homosexual male couples to produce a child with genetic material from both partners.

The article explains: "Sheffield University researchers took a step towards developing the vital ingredients for human reproduction from embryonic stem cells, sparking ethical questions of how far experts should go in developing artificial reproduction. The consequences of such work might even mean gay couples or single men could produce children while women's fertility would no longer be ended by the menopause. It is a far cry from present artificial fertility techniques, where embryos are made in the lab from human eggs and sperm collected from donors. Although the successful mimicking of biological functions still might be some way off, it joins other research, including a project on an 'artificial womb,' in raising profound issues about the nature of human life and parenthood."

Anna Smajdor, a researcher in medical ethics at Imperial College, London, told the paper that the technology could provide "an obvious solution to infertile couples." Nevertheless, infertile heterosexual couples would not be alone in finding applications for this technology. "Gay couples could have children genetically related to both. Single men could even produce a child using their own sperm and an engineered egg, opening the way to a new form of cloning. Women's fertility would no longer need to be curtailed at the menopause," she said. "These possibilities raise new questions about how we define parenthood and about how we decide who has access to these new technologies."

BRAVE NEW LINK: James Meikle, Sperm and Eggs Could Be Created From Stem Cells, Says New Study, The Guardian [London], Monday, June 20, 2005.

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