

Embryos' fate: A fertile debate; Families struggle with science, faith when viable eggs are frozen in lab

Manya A Brachear. [Chicago Tribune](#). Chicago, Ill.: [Nov 10, 2009](#). pg. 1

Abstract (Summary)

In the minds of many fertility doctors and patients, President Barack Obama's decision to lift the ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research also lifted a stigma, inspiring some IVF patients to give research -- stem cell and other kinds -- more serious consideration. [...] the sheer volume of embryos in storage has spurred fertility centers to form new partnerships with research institutions that have only recently received federal funds and adoption agencies that want to match embryos with potential parents.

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Full Text

(1758 words)

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In-vitro fertilization made it possible for Adriana and Robert Potter to welcome twins Anabella and Matteus into the world. For the same reasons many couples can't conceive, IVF was their only option if they wanted children of their own.

But with that choice came another: what to do with two other embryos created in the same petri dish but never placed in the womb. On that dilemma, the Potters have agreed to disagree for now.

If the Elmhurst couple decides they don't want more children, Adriana Potter believes donating the embryos to advance reproductive technology or treat debilitating diseases would be the most life-affirming choice.

"Think about it. The only way we got this far with IVF is because there was research in the past," she said. "There were sacrifices to help families like us have kids. ... When it comes to promoting the creation of new life, you have modern medicine and the choice to use it for good, to fulfill dreams."

Robert Potter imagines having more children to fulfill God's mandate to be fruitful and multiply. But if they decide to have no more, he favors donating the embryos for another couple to do the same. Viable embryos should not be taken for granted, he said.

"It's not just a moral (issue). It's a waste," he said. "Why would you waste an opportunity if it's a good one?"

As thousands of frozen embryos continue to accumulate and pressure mounts to decide their fates, doctors say more families must weigh the promise and perils of adoption and research.

At this time last year, doctors say, the absence of government funds combined with the economic downturn stalled most meaningful embryonic science, making donations to research a riskier and more radical option. Some laboratories stopped accepting donations, forcing some fertility centers to hold on to embryos despite parents' preference to devote them to research.

In the minds of many fertility doctors and patients, President Barack Obama's decision to lift the ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research also lifted a stigma, inspiring some IVF patients to give research -- stem cell and other kinds -- more serious consideration.

Likewise, the sheer volume of embryos in storage has spurred fertility centers to form new partnerships with research institutions that have only recently received federal funds and adoption agencies that want to match embryos with potential parents. Such decisions, doctors say, are often informed and framed by faith.

Adriana, a lapsed Roman Catholic, and Robert, a lifelong Methodist, married in June 2000. The Methodist pastor who presided over their wedding advised them to draft a list of goals and revise them together every year.

For the first five years, those goals revolved around their education and travel destinations. Robert received a master's degree in management. Adriana got a doctorate in physical therapy with a specialty in women's health. By the time they moved to Illinois and reviewed the list in 2005, the only goal left was having children. So they tried. But after three years, trying began to lose its romance.

She charted her ovulation, took her temperature and bought all the gimmicks at the supermarket to boost fertility. But nothing happened.

After a series of tests, doctors finally broke the news. For a number of reasons, including his sperm count, shape and motility, a natural pregnancy without a little help from science was nearly impossible.

It took two attempts at in vitro fertilization. On the second try, four embryos were produced -- but only two with a likelihood of survival at the moment of implantation. The two most likely to last were implanted.

Later that day, the couple got a call. The other two blastula had become viable too. The Potters froze them in case the second attempt also failed or the pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage. But in October, they delivered twins.

Now the Potters face the dilemma of what to do with the other embryos.

They could place the embryos in the womb for gestation when they are ready to have more children. Another couple could adopt the embryos. They could donate to science. Or they could thaw the embryos and discard them.

Marie Davidson, a staff psychologist with Fertility Centers of Illinois, one of the largest fertility services in the state, said that only in recent years have frozen embryos become the source of discord and debate between couples pursuing reproductive technology.

Davidson attributes the heightened tension to public debate and timing. As time goes by, the decision becomes imminent for more couples.

"We bring it up with people early before they're in that position," Davidson said. "When they sign that consent form, they know they may have a difficult decision ahead of them."

Fertility Centers of Illinois now stores about 20,000 embryos from about 4,550 patients.

Davidson advises patients to seek professional advice from physicians, counselors, specialists in reproductive law and clergy. But every decision has its pluses and minuses, she said.

"When you donate an embryo to research, you are accepting that is the demise of the embryo, which is a big barrier for people," she said. Furthermore, not all embryos are acceptable for donation.

For some couples, "the concept of having full genetic siblings of your children raised by another family is hard to wrap your mind round," Davidson said.

Parents still feel responsible for the child's well-being and donating to research "might mean the embryo is part of a cure for a serious illness," she said.

To create more options, Fertility Centers of Illinois recently agreed to provide embryos to the University of Michigan. Its longtime relationship with the Harvard Stem Cell Institute is on hold as Harvard fine-tunes its procedures to meet new guidelines established in July by the National Institutes of Health.

Fertility Centers of Illinois also recently launched an embryo matching program with the Adoption Center for Family Building in Skokie for couples looking to donate their embryos to prospective parents.

Davidson emphasizes that it's not a decision a couple should rush to make. Five years is often considered a reasonable time frame, she said.

The freedom to make that decision without condemnation is one of the many factors Adriana finds appealing about the Methodist church, where the couple will baptize their children right before Christmas. Raised Roman Catholic in Brazil, Adriana began to drift after a heart-wrenching divorce.

She cannot imagine her offspring raised by another family without any control over their upbringing. By devoting them to research, she as their mother would have the final say about their greater purpose in life.

But Robert doesn't trust that every embryo fulfills a greater purpose. He can't imagine sentencing two potential children to short lives that would end in a laboratory.

The Rev. Norma Lee Barnhart, pastor of Elmhurst First Methodist Church, encourages the couple to have conversations with God and with each other.

The Methodist church endorses stem cell research, though it doesn't dictate that's what a couple should choose. Citing First Corinthians 13:12a letter the apostle Paul wrote 2,000 years ago describing the process of maturing in one's faith, she prescribes time and patience.

"In our faith those decisions are made by the person with God's help and with the help of the church community," she said.

"If we just live with the ambiguity of the unknown and try to stay in the moment, eventually God gives us the answers we need in the time that we need them."

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Think tank tries to give faithful a guide

When determining the fate of embryos created by in-vitro fertilization but not returned to the womb, people of faith often rely on religious tenets to shed light on the dilemma.

To distill the range of religious perspectives, an interfaith think tank and team of medical and legal professionals are working to develop a care kit for fertility centers, obstetricians and congregations to share with patients.

"We found there was confusion, disharmony and a real sense of loss as to how to make the right choice," said psychotherapist Susan Weitzman, a founder of the think tank with the working name Frozen in Time, and who has encountered many couples grappling with the issue. "When you're dealing with life-and-death issues, religion and spirituality become important fiber."

Rabbi Robert Gamer, a member of the think tank, said many couples have sought his advice on the issue since he became a rabbi in 2002.

"In general, people of faith want to try to figure out what it is that God wants of us," he said. "Certainly with frozen embryos that has been the case."

The Rev. Don Fagerberg, a Lutheran pastor on the team, said it's only natural for couples to seek a moral compass when it comes to reproductive technology.

"We have been able to advance in areas of knowledge much faster than we have been able to advance in the areas of wisdom," he said. "We can create, we can control, we can do a lot of things and we have not even determined yet whether in fact we should do certain things."

The think tank also encompasses traditions that discourage assisted reproductive technology or freezing embryos in the first place.

Marcia Hermansen, an Islamic scholar at Loyola University, said Islam does not forbid stem cell research or the destruction of extra embryos because Muslims believe embryos do not have the status of a person.

Msgr. Robert Dempsey, a member of the Chicago Archdiocese's bioethics commission, said although the church cautions against IVF, its pastoral role doesn't end when couples do it and face the consequences. But the violation of church teaching does create a conundrum for theologians, he said.

"The real solution is not to create the problem at all," he said. "In the end, Catholic moralists would say they have to sit down with a priest with some background in these questions who can work out what the various implications are ... and try to guide them toward a responsible decision."

-- Manya A. Brachear
