

# The Linacre Quarterly

---

Volume 65 | Number 2

Article 3

---

May 1998

## The Media and Human Embryology

C. Ward Kischer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kischer, C. Ward (1998) "The Media and Human Embryology," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 65 : No. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol65/iss2/3>

# The Media and Human embryology

by

C. Ward Kischer, Ph.D.

*The author is Associate Professor Emeritus of Anatomy at the University of Arizona, College of Medicine, Tucson, AZ.*

---

A very informative book was published in 1990 entitled, *And That's The Way It Isn't, A Reference Guide To Media Bias*.<sup>1</sup> The authors were Brent Bozell and Brent Baker. It is essentially a political expose that details the liberal bias by the media (which really means the reporters, writers, and correspondents) relative to political issues. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the authors prove their point.

However, there is another related issue involved in this bias. In reading about the obvious bias on political issues, one wonders if some of it is generated by sheer *ignorance*. It is pretty obvious that some, if not many, of the reporters and TV news anchors express their emotional opinions, but that they also would (or should) never say them if they had checked facts or history for the truth.

*Roe v. Wade* was adjudicated by the Supreme Court in 1973. Prior to this decision there was little or no public interest in human embryology, the science of development. But, because the questions of *life* and *viability* were raised by the court, these subjects, and ancillary topics, increasingly were written about in newspapers, magazines, books and scientific journals. They were (and are) also discussed on radio and television talk shows.

Incredibly, those most often talking about human development have been political analysts, lawyers, theologians, and sociologists, but very few physicians and virtually *no* human embryologists. Those doing most of the writing and talking have not checked the facts and certainly have not consulted human embryologists. Why this has been the case is something of a mystery, although it can be reasonably

guessed at considering the investment in the political fallout from *Roe v. Wade*.

It is reasonable to say that more false information, misrepresentations, half-truths and outright lies concerning human embryology have been stated since *Roe v. Wade* than at any previous time in history, including ancient times. Before Hippocrates (ca. 400 B.C.) the errors may seem to have been more outrageous, but there were not that many of them. The ancients, for the most part, knew when to keep their mouths shut, contrary to contemporary times in which virtually everyone has an opinion expressed as "fact."

Bias and ignorance, relating to human embryology, are often indistinguishable. However, one fact is provable: those writing about contemporary human embryology are not consulting proper, available references.

### **The Preembryo**

The most damning lie written about human embryology is the case of the *preembyo*.<sup>2 3</sup> This is a term invented in 1979 by an amphibian embryologist, Clifford Grobstein, for one purpose only: to establish a *reduced moral status* for the human embryo up to at least 14 days post-fertilization.<sup>4</sup>

This reduced status was deemed necessary because in vitro fertilization techniques were becoming a viable industry and some sort of justification had to be made for manipulating early human life. The rationale put forth by Grobstein later became the basis for guidelines set forth by the Ethics Committee of the American Fertility Society (of which Grobstein was a member)<sup>5</sup> and of the Ethics Committee of the American College of Gynecologists.<sup>6</sup> Grobstein's reasoning also became the basis for justifying human embryo research, as proposed by the National Institutes of Health Advisory Committee in 1994.<sup>7</sup>

The term *preembryo* has not been, and should not be, accepted by any reputable human embryologist. The one exception has been Keith Moore who uses the term in his 5th edition of a human embryology textbook.<sup>8</sup> But, in a personal letter to this author, Moore said he would remove it in his next printing. Indeed, in the 3rd printing of his text the term *preembryo* has been removed. But, its equivalent, *preembryonic*, is retained.



The failure to check facts relative to human embryology is not restricted to the pro-choice advocacy. In no less a publication than *Donum Vitae*, a Vatican publication on bioethics, we find the use of the inaccurate and invalid term *preembryo*.<sup>9</sup> It is a virtual certainty that those who put this publication together did not know of the lack of credibility of the term, or, assuredly, that it means a reduced moral status. A nursing text also uses the term as a bona fide stage.<sup>10</sup>

This has been the unfortunate fall-out from a constant and unrelenting use of false information without proper correction from physicians and, especially, human embryologists. It is truly inexplicable as to why those who know the facts have failed to confront this term, which is the worst case of abuse of embryological facts concerning the human.

### **Monitoring the Media**

As a professor of human embryology for more than 30 years, I finally took an interest in what the media was saying about this subject. It was also my aim to make my students aware of the errors and false statements commonly made. Thus, for several years they were instructed to cull through the more commonly used and popularly read newspapers, magazines, and scientific journals for articles relating to human embryology. They were to cite the errors found and analyze them. The following citations illustrate just a sample of the types of errors found over the most recent years. Each citation is followed by the proper correction.

- "[The forming embryo] looks a little like a segmented worm...something like the gill arches of a fish or an amphibian have become conspicuous, and there is a pronounced tail....The face is mammalian but somewhat piglike...By the end of the eighth week, the face resembles a primate's, but is still not quite human."

- Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan.  
"Is it Possible to be Pro-Life and Pro-Choice?"  
*Parade*, April 22, 1990

This is perhaps the most shameful display of both bias and ignorance. Sagan's ignorance is not restricted to the above quotes. The article is replete with outright lies.

The overall effect of the article is to diminish the human aspect of the human embryo. The truth is that our evolution as an embryo passes through changes which are *similar* to the changes in other vertebrate embryos. Such similarities speak eloquently for the basic biological plan of all living things subject to the same physical and chemical laws. The human embryo *never* develops gill arches, or gills, or a tail. Neither is the human embryo ever a worm, a pig, or a primate. Carl Sagan was not a human embryologist, but an astrophysicist. He did a great disservice to the general public, as had *Parade* magazine.

- "You must remember, we're talking about Post Mortem tissue."

- Bernardine Healy, former Director  
of NIH, interviewed by Diane Sawyer,  
Prime Time Live, January 28, 1993

Sawyer had interviewed Healy about the use of live fetuses for transplant tissues for cases, such as Parkinson's Disease. The truth is that *dead* tissue would do nothing. The transplant *must* contain living cells, and the only way to ensure that is to obtain them from *living* fetuses.

- "In the emergency room we pronounce a person dead when the heart stops beating. I would like to propose we just reverse that, that life begins when the heart *starts* beating."

-Third year medical student call-in  
to an afternoon talk show, KNST,  
Tucson, AZ, April 17, 1993

Our medical students are not being taught very well in human embryology. Obviously, this student received little or no instruction in the subject. This is not surprising since about half of our nation's medical schools have no credit-bearing course in human embryology. Virtually every human embryologist agrees that life begins at first contact of sperm and ovum, which is the only statement which makes sense.



- "Can you imagine a world in which we jail women for drinking while pregnant?"

- Dr. Dean Edell, populist radio medical diagnostician, scoffing at the jailing of pregnant women who drink alcohol and produce Fetal Alcohol Syndrome babies, circa 1994.

He also ridiculed the idea that fetuses should have human rights prior to birth. He read a statement that would prohibit legal rights for fetuses to which he said, "Amen." Of course, this violates the medical concept of regarding the fetus as a "second patient." His advocacy also conflicts with 31 states which allow lawsuits for the negligent death of a viable fetus and criminal prosecutions in at least 25 states.

Dr. Edell has also publicly declared that he "hated every second of medical school." Little wonder that he has no respect for human embryology.

- "The placenta, which protects the fetus from toxic substances in the mother's bloodstream, also filters out most drugs."

- Joanne Silberner, "Fighting Disease Before Birth", *US News & World Report*, November 21, 1988.

Unfortunately, the *opposite* is true. Virtually every human embryologist says: "...most drugs and drug metabolites pass the placenta without difficulty...fetal drug addiction can occur after maternal use of drugs such as heroin and cocaine."<sup>11</sup>

- "With the advance of medical technology during the last two decades, the age at which a human fetus can survive outside its mother's womb, the so-called age of viability, has steadily declined...some premature infants of 20 weeks, and most of 24 weeks, can survive *ex-utero*"

- S. Meyer and D.K. De Wolf, "Fetal Position", *National Review*, pp. 62- 64, March 20, 1995

Surviving outside the mother's womb is a misleading concept. It is rubbish! The newborn, whether term or premature may survive outside the mother's womb only *as long as its needs are met!* It needs more care after birth than before.

What is not said is that the younger the age of birth prior to term the greater reduction in the quality of life. Many problems of premature births are never resolved. It is irresponsible to speak of viability of early delivery without correspondingly revealing the many problems these infants have.

- "Now many women live 'til they're 80 or 90; so, maybe it's not so outrageous for them to have kids at 50."  
- Marilyn Elias, "Who Controls Reproductive Technology", *USA Today*, January 5, 1994, A1:4.

On the contrary, it is! And it's outrageous to make a statement like that. It is well known that there are increased birth defects when the pregnant mother is older, particularly with the case of Trisomy 21 (Down Syndrome).

- "The AMA says use of live anencephalic infants – those born without brains – as organ donors is acceptable if the diagnosis of their condition is certain and the parents agree to donation."  
- Amanda Husted, "Doctors Can Say No To Patients", *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 1995, reported by the *Washington Times*, May 4.

Shame on the AMA! What is not said and should be said is what would be said by any human embryologist. Anencephaly is a major developmental defect. Watch out for other defects before thinking about organ donation. Moore says: "Ninety percent of infants with three or more minor anomalies also have one or more major defects."<sup>12</sup> Although the reverse may not necessarily be true, most major defects are multiple and not singular in nature.

- "I will not sign this bill because...it does not provide for the



exceptions of life of the mother or health of the mother."

- President Clinton, vetoing the  
Partial Birth Abortion Act,  
April 10, 1996

- "Are there doctors in this country who would perform this procedure on a healthy baby in the third trimester?"  
- "60 Minutes" reporter Ed Bradley  
June 2, 1996

"I don't know of any. I don't know of any."

- Dr. Warren Hern,  
responding to above

If the "life" or "health" of the mother is threatened by the head of the fetus remaining in the birth canal, the simplest procedure would be to deliver the head, rather than poke a hole in it and suck out its brains. Therefore, the objective is not to preserve "life" or "health" of the mother, but to kill the fetus.

Serious defects of the fetus excepted, in a purely elective procedure, the "health" of the mother would be relieved because she would not be troubled with the expected care of the infant, nor to make a decision for adoption.

Both of the women who appeared with President Clinton on the April 10 veto celebration received abortions from the late Dr. James McMahan. Along with Dr. Martin Haskell, they performed thousands of these partial birth abortions, the vast majority of them purely elective, 80% of them on perfectly healthy fetuses. Ed Bradley and 60 Minutes knew this before posing the above question to Dr. Hern.

- "...the embryo does not have the same moral status as infants or children and that research on such embryos hold the potential for great benefit...Others, like me, will find it hard to consider the tiny clumps of primitive cells as anything approaching a "person"...I would find it easier to eliminate a handful of unfeeling, unaware cells than to destroy say, a living breathing animal"

- Mary Cantwell, "Should We Make



Perfect arrogance. This was said of the proposed research recommended by the NIH Human Embryo Research Panel. Obviously, Cantwell has no appreciation for human embryology and the reality of the continuum of life. By her reasoning those individuals who, for one reason or another, are unfeeling and unaware, may not escape medical experimentation or outright extermination. This is exactly what happened in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s.

- "Surely you don't believe a fertilized egg is a human being, do you?"

- Geraldine Ferraro, Crossfire, CNN broadcast, August 7, 1996.

This question was put to Gary Bauer, President of the Family Research Council. He sat mute, did not respond but simply shrugged. Not even Robert Novak, co-host of Crossfire, responded.

This kind of silence (Bauer made the claim to this author that he did not hear the question) only exacerbates the problems of the Pro-Life advocacy. Any high school biology student would have said: "Of course," and asked Ms. Ferraro if she thought the fertilized human oocyte would be a frog, pig, or chimpanzee!

### Conclusion

This is only scratching the surface. No major media publication, newspaper, or magazine, or those scientific journals reporting about human embryology escaped our analysis.

True enough, we did not use a scientific grading system for accuracy. However, no publication got off clean with no errors or misrepresentations.

What is reported here are examples, not necessarily all of the types of errors found. Some publications exercise no quality control at all, as is true of some writers.

Clearly, there is a major problem. The public knows little about

human embryology, although some ignorant writers think they know more than they actually show. If these writers would make even a little effort and seek basic information, much of the problem would be relieved. It is not going to be solved by seeking out political analysis, politicians, and ethicists.

Human embryologists are also at fault for not speaking out at the plethora of nonsense, gibberish, and false information replete in the mainstream media. They have a responsibility, if only from the aspect of being a good citizen, to correct the misinformation. Why they are not doing this is a mystery. It should be explored.

---

### References

1. Brent L. Bozell III and Brent H. Baker, *And That's the Way It Isn't, A Reference Guide to Media Bias*, (Medical Research Center, Alexandria, VA, 1990).
2. C.W. Kischer, "The Big Lie in Human Embryology", *Linacre Quarterly*, 64: 53-61.
3. C.W. Kischer and D.N. Irving, *The Human Development Hoax, Time to Tell the Truth*, (Gold Leaf Press, Clinton Township, MI, 1995).
4. Clifford Grobstein, "External Human Fertilization", *Sci. Amer.*, 240:57-67, 1979.
5. Ethics Committee of the American Fertility Society, *Fertility and Sterility*, Suppl. 1, 46:275, 1986.
6. Ethics Committee of the American College of Gynecologists, *Preembryo Research: History, Scientific Background and Ethical Considerations*, (Resource Center, ACOG, Washington D.C., 1994).
7. National Institutes of Health, Transcripts of the Human Embryo Research Panel, September 27th session, p. 2, 1994.
8. Keith Moore and T.V.N. Persaud, *The Developing Human*, 5th ed., (W. B. Saunders Co., Philadelphia, PA, 1993).
9. *Donum Vitae*, (Respect for Human Life), (Pauline Books & Media, Boston, MA, 1987).

10. K.A. May and L.R. Maklmeister, *Maternal and Neonatal Nursing Family-Centered Care*, 3rd. ed., (Lippincott, Philadelphia, PA, 1995).

11. T.W. Sadler, *Langman's Medical Embryology*, Sixth ed., (Williams and Wilkins, Baltimore, MD, 1990), p. 106.

12. K.L. Moore and T.V.N. Persaud, *The Developing Human*, 5th ed., (W.B. Saunders, Philadelphia, PA, 1993), p. 142.