

Cannabis - an *Independent* view? *Broadsheet comes clean at last*

Review by **Rachael Pickering**
Triple Helix Associate Editor

After ten years of campaigning for the decriminalisation of Britain's most widely available drug, the *Independent* newspaper has decided to come clean. In dramatic fashion, its 18 March front page announced an apologetic U-turn over its position on the legalisation of cannabis.¹

Many of us recall their 1997 campaign: 'Today, the *Independent on Sunday* calls for personal use of cannabis to be decriminalised...the paper's campaign will continue until the law is changed and possession of marijuana [cannabis] is no longer an offence'.²

The *Independent* is a respected broadsheet and its editors carry social and political clout. So, although its campaign wasn't entirely successful – cannabis for personal use has never been formally decriminalised – there is no doubt that it did do immense damage. Despite clear

warnings from a variety of professional bodies including its own Drugs Czar,³ the Government eventually went ahead and downgraded cannabis into a Class C drug. At the time, the *Independent* happily received credit for forcing this reclassification; and ever since then, millions in the UK have happily received the message that cannabis is harmless.

What has caused the editors of the *Independent* to make such an apology? Apparently, it comes on the back of statistics showing that the number of people requiring treatment after using cannabis has almost doubled over the last two years.⁴ They also claim that things have changed, that modern-day skunk is so much more dangerous than the 1990s' brands. And they plead ignorance – their retraction headline: 'If only we had known then what we can reveal today...' –¹ – citing evidence about the danger of cannabis that was published in the *Lancet* later the same week.⁵

In today's society where admission of error is often perceived as a sign of weakness, it was refreshing to read the *Independent's* apology. However, their plea of innocence on grounds of ignorance is both saddening and unconvincing. In the last issue of *Triple Helix*, psychiatrist Dominic Beer pulled together very convincing evidence – dating back to five years before their campaign began in 1997 – that cannabis most definitely is harmful to the mental health of thousands of UK citizens, most especially young people.⁶

references

- Owen J. Cannabis: an apology. *Independent* 2007; 18 March:1 news.independent.co.uk/uk/health_medical/article2368994.ece
- www.ccguide.org.uk/sundep28.php
- news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2118953.stm
- NHS National Treatment Agency. www.nta.nhs.uk
- Nutt D *et al.* *Lancet* 2007; 369:1047-1053
- Beer D. *Triple Helix* 2007; Winter:10-11 www.cmf.org.uk/literature/content.asp?context=article&id=1907

Euthanasia *Latest developments in the campaign for legalisation*

Review by **Peter Saunders**
CMF General Secretary

Over the last ten years the British pro-euthanasia lobby has very effectively used high-profile 'hard cases' of motor neurone disease to champion its cause: Annie Lindsell, Reginald Crew, John Close and, most famously, Diane Pretty. She sought her husband's assistance in her suicide, and in 2002 took her case to the European Court, and lost.

The 2006 campaign to legalise assisted suicide was built around Dr Anne Turner, a Bath GP with progressive supranuclear palsy, who committed suicide at the Dignitas Clinic in Zurich, Switzerland on 24 January that year.¹ The British Voluntary Euthanasia Society had interestingly rebranded itself as *Dignity in Dying* the day before Turner's death², and the second reading (debate stage) of Lord Joffe's *Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill* was planned for 12 May, the day after the fourth anniversary of Diane Pretty's death.

Lord Joffe's Bill was defeated by 148-100 in the House of Lords after a successful campaign led by the *Care Not Killing Alliance*, in which CMF played a key role.

A new strategy soon emerged. Having had both euthanasia and assisted suicide blocked by parliament, the pro-euthanasia lobby now seems to be seeking to bring in euthanasia 'via the back door' through a combination of 'terminal sedation' and 'living wills'. As part of this they are encouraging supporters to write to Lord Hunt, the health minister, to establish a national electronic database of 'advance directives' and to register their own living wills with MedicAlert.³ The *Mental Capacity Act*, which introduces legally binding 'advance directives', comes into full force on 1 October.

The public face of this year's campaign has been Kelly Taylor,⁴ a 30-year-old Bristol woman with Eisenmenger's syndrome, who sought High Court permission to be sedated with morphine until unconscious, and then starved and dehydrated to death under an advance directive. Taylor dropped her action on 18 April after the High Court denied her an adjournment,⁵ but the case prompted letters from leading palliative medicine doctors to both national newspapers⁶ and the *British Medical Journal*⁷. They pointed out that properly used, morphine does not

hasten death and that its sedative effects wear off quickly, making it useless for sustaining unconsciousness. Rather than changing the law to allow the active ending of life by terminal sedation and dehydration, they commended Baroness Ilor Finlay's *Palliative Care Bill*,⁸ which seeks to improve access to good palliative care.

Christian doctors need to stay abreast of these issues – both by promoting palliative care, and by opposing any moves to weaken the law to allow assisted suicide or euthanasia. We should also pray that the Finlay Bill, which had an unopposed second reading in the House of Lords on 23 February, is granted the necessary parliamentary time to proceed.

references

- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4625538.stm>
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4638766.stm>
- www.livingwillscampaign.org.uk
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/6353339.stm>
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/bristol/6568217.stm>
- www.carenotkilling.org.uk/?show=392
- BMJ* 2007;334:440 (3 March)
- www.carenotkilling.org.uk/?show=393



Human-animal hybrids

Government must maintain its proposed prohibition

Review by **Andrew Fergusson**
CMF Head of Communications

In 2005 the Department of Health consulted widely on the future of the Human Fertilisation Embryology (HFE) Act, and CMF made a substantial Submission¹. One of the many questions asked concerned creating human hybrid and chimera embryos, which would contain genetic material from both humans and non-human animals. Of the 336 specific responses, 277 were opposed². On this basis, the Government recommended in a December 2006 White Paper that 'the creation of hybrid and chimera embryos in vitro, should not be allowed'³.

Early in the New Year, the science community, with the backing of the biotechnology industry and (later) 223 medical research charities and patient organisations⁴ mounted a skilful campaign that currently threatens to overturn this proposed prohibition. After a media blitz during which an ambushed Prime Minister appeared to reverse policy on the hoof, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee ran a hastily convened consultation. CMF contributed to this⁵ but with the outcome leaked well in

advance, this Committee reported in April in favour of allowing the creation of such embryos provided they are not allowed to develop beyond the 14-day stage and are not implanted into a woman⁶. The HFE Authority is organising a full public consultation, and Parliament should have the final say this autumn.

What are the issues here? First, it is the shortage of human ova that has led to the idea that human genetic material should be inserted into the hollowed-out nuclei of cow or rabbit eggs, for research leading to the production of human embryonic stem cells. Second, much has been made of the so-called *Yuk!* factor and certainly tabloid headlines last year about 'Frankenbunnies' did not help the debate.

CMF has argued that people's intuitions do amount to more than a *Yuk!* factor, and concur with a Christian critique of the proposals. In the *CMF File* on the subject⁷ that accompanies this mailing, it is argued that while biology perhaps does not give us clear enough boundaries to justify a prohibition, then concepts arising from a Christian view of humanity certainly do. The 'image of

God', the Genesis language of 'kinds', the importance of historicity or lineage, and the significance of human relationships all provide strong arguments against deliberately combining humans and non-human animals. And of course, these proposals add insult to the injury of human embryos.

As we seek to argue this watershed issue within the ever-declining degree of democratic dialogue, let us be well armed for the forthcoming war of the worldviews.

references

1. www.cmf.org.uk/ethics/submissions/?id=39
2. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee: Government proposals for the regulation of hybrid and chimera embryos. 2007. HC 272-1. Para 41
3. Department of Health: Review of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. December 2006. Para 2.85
4. Press Statement. Association of Medical Research Charities and Genetic Interest Group. 5 April 2007
5. www.cmf.org.uk/ethics/submissions/?id=43
6. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee: Government proposals for the regulation of hybrid and chimera embryos. 2007. HC 272-1. Conclusions and recommendations
7. CMF File 34. Chimeras, hybrids and 'cybrids'. June 2007

Slave children

We need another Wilberforce to free the child slaves of today

Review by **Janet Goodall**
Retired consultant paediatrician, Stoke on Trent

A slave is a person who is owned by another and is forced to work in degrading conditions. Despite the supposed abolition of slavery in the United Kingdom, we still house many trafficked individuals, who are the slaves of today.

Less well known than trafficking of adults, the United Nations estimates 8.5 million child slaves exist worldwide, 1.2 million of whom have been trafficked. Children such as five-year-old shepherds in rural Africa are not counted as slaves, for they still live at home and are helping their families. Yet elsewhere, children as young as seven are being sold for pitifully low sums by desperately poor parents. Imagine the fear and mounting despair should the new 'master' be harsh, or (as with many of the 24,000 children to be found in Jeddah) smuggle them into a strange land and force them to beg. Some have undergone deliberate mutilation to elicit more sympathy and more

cash. They constantly risk deportation, while their new owners do not. Their young lives lurch from crisis to catastrophe.

Less noticeable are the 50,000 children employed in the sweatshops of Delhi, producing attractive handiwork for the tourist or textile trades. To the price of elaborately embroidered saris must be added the cost of a child's freedom. Detained illegally, these children often work 18 hours a day, sleeping in the shop and receiving minimal food. After years of this life, one 13-year-old was rescued and excitedly returned to his village. On seeing him, his poverty stricken mother wailed, 'Why have you come back to add to my sorrows?' His shocked, helpless bewilderment lingers in the mind and heart.

Elsewhere, children are kidnapped to become child soldiers or sex slaves, leaving them with indelible emotional damage. In Cambodia alone, a million children are trapped into commercial sex. They have either been kidnapped or promised good jobs by

unscrupulous traders. Likely to be free at first from HIV, virgins as young as twelve are eagerly bartered for. Raids on brothels in the last decade have released a mere 3,000 young girls, but the pimps are rarely convicted.

So what can we do? Our Lord had – and has – a special heart for children. We too should therefore esteem and love them. In the so-called developed world, children can be enslaved by advertisements or by personal and parental ambition as much as by more obvious forms of abuse. Yet surely the huge problems of slave children in other parts of the world demand more than our prayers. We must search for and support appropriate agencies working where the action is.

Could it be that someone somewhere will also be called to become a Wilberforce for the world's enslaved children?

references

All figures quoted are from *Slave Children*. BBC 2. 25 March 2007