

# EUTYCHUS

## Frozen embryos in the balance

Nattalie Evans has lost her case in the Court of Appeal to have her frozen embryos implanted without her partner's consent. The 32-year-old Wiltshire woman, who became infertile after chemotherapy for cancer, had later split from Howard Johnston after the couple had undergone IVF treatment.

Whilst fathers have no say in abortion decisions, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act ironically requires the consent of both an embryo's parents at each stage of artificial reproduction. In making the judgement Lord Justice Thorpe also ruled that the embryos should not yet be destroyed, in order to give Ms Evans an opportunity to appeal to the House of Lords. (*BBC* 2004; 25 June, *Triple Helix* 2004; Winter:12-13)

## A place for abstinence in drug misuse

Abstinence needs to be back on the agenda for drug and alcohol misuse according to the RCGP regional lead in drug misuse, Gordon Morse. Abstaining from drugs and alcohol fell out of favour with the introduction of harm-reduction programmes, which aimed to ease patients off drugs with substitutes such as methadone. But Morse told a recent sex, drugs and HIV task force group conference that abstinence programmes run by Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous were cheap and potentially effective. 'I want to debunk some of the myths surrounding abstinence', he said. (*Pulse* 2004; 7 June)

## Lessons from the past

Germany has overreacted to Nazi doctors' abuse of human rights by restricting embryo research, according to a leading German academic. Rolf Winau, Professor of the History of Medicine at the Free University of Berlin, made his comments at the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology Conference in Berlin. Procedures involving destruction of human embryos, like pre-implantation genetic diagnosis and therapeutic cloning are currently illegal in Germany but legal in the UK. Winau argued that selection and destruction of embryos with genetic abnormalities is not eugenic, and that Germany's embryo protection law should be revised to take this into account. (*The Times* 2004; 28 June)

## Human animal hybrids

Creating human-animal hybrid cells is legal in Britain due to a legal loophole. Under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, experiments that create hybrid cells require a licence only when human and animal gametes are fused directly, or where the result is an embryo that could develop into a human. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), which says it would back a review of the law, commented: 'When the Act came into force (in 1991) people didn't think about how far science would have moved on by now.' (*The Times* 2004; 1 June)

## Australia reverses morning-after pill decision

The Australian government is to ban sales of the morning-after pill levonorgestrel (Postinor-2) only six months after making it available over the counter at pharmacies. The decision was prompted by concerns that girls as young as 13 were using it as emergency contraception. (*British Medical Journal* 2004; 328:1454, 19 June) The pill is still sold widely over the counter in the UK, and is also available in schools.

## Demographic burdens of our own making

Industrialised nations with low fertility rates and ageing populations face debt burdens worse than during the Second World War. A report by Standard and Poor's found that European countries, including Germany, France and Greece could see debt grow to over 200% of gross domestic product by 2050, whilst Japan faces a debt of more than 700% of GDP. Richard Jackson, senior fellow in charge of the demography project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in the US said: 'In a scenario which is about as optimistic as you can get, that still leaves fiscal meltdown in just about every country in 25 years.' (*Financial Times* 2004; 1 April) The demographic changes that have created the crisis have been fuelled in large part by abortion and choices to delay childbearing and limit family size. Will the generation that saw children as a burden itself be seen as a burden by the next generation? And what solutions might be sought?

## Getting that new look

Grey hair may be a thing of the past if genetic research planned by a cosmetics company is successful. L'Oreal has pinpointed genes that influence when and whether a person's hair is likely to turn white, opening the way to treatments that might reverse the process. Meanwhile a team in Louisville, Kentucky, has applied for formal approval to perform the first face transplant by the end of this year. (*The Times* 2004; 27 May)

## Christian student provokes media storm over abortion

A motion proposed by a CMF student member and passed by the annual general meeting of the British Medical Association on 1 July has provoked a media storm over babies being left to die after being born alive following 'failed abortions'. The motion, proposed by Cambridge student Bryony Dunning-Davies, called for such babies to receive life-saving treatment, and was originally passed by the BMA Students' Conference earlier this year. Two articles in *The Sunday Times* catalogued six cases following an investigation by journalists, and the story later made the front page in other daily newspapers. (*Sunday Times* 2004; 20, 27 June) Babies in England and Wales can be legally aborted up to 24 weeks for 'social reasons' and up to birth if there is a risk of serious handicap. 1,354 babies of 22 weeks or more were aborted in England and Wales in 2002. A recent major review has shown survival rates of 66% for babies born at 23 weeks gestation during the period 1996-2000. (*Paediatrics* 2004; 113(1):e1-6, 1 January)

## Government funding debacle

The Christian charity *Love for Life*, which by invitation runs a popular and successful abstinence-based sex education programme in over 150 Northern Ireland secondary schools, has been denied government funding to support its work. Meanwhile government funding has been granted to support a campaign aimed at informing girls under the age of consent that they have the right to 'confidential advice on contraception, condoms, pregnancy and abortion'. The campaign planned by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit (TPU) will use teen magazines as its main outlet, and follows in the wake of the high profile case of a 14-year-old Nottingham schoolgirl who had an abortion without the knowledge of her mother after talks with 'advisers' at school. (*The Times* 2004; 14 May)