

Italy says no

Now what's the question? The questions are about gamete donation, embryo research, embryo adoption and embryo freezing and Italy has said 'no' to all these in stringent draft laws to regulate fertility services. The law has yet to be passed by the Italian Senate but would be by far the most restrictive in Europe. (Source: *Catholic Medical Quarterly*, August 1999; p16-18)

Japan to ban human cloning?

An advisory committee to the Japanese prime minister has ruled that current guidelines to prevent human cloning are inadequate and recommends a legal ban. The panel 'argued that cloning has no positive utility, runs counter to respect for human life, and poses safety problems'. If passed, the draft government bill would be the first legal prohibition of life science research in Japan. (Source: *British Medical Journal*, 27 November 1999; 319:1390)

Human ova auctioned on Internet

Pornographer Ron Harris has offered the eggs of eight attractive young US models for sale on the Internet to the highest bidder. His site is called 'ronsangels'. Within hours, more than a million Americans had logged on. What does this say about the future of parenthood? What about some global legal action to prevent this? (Source: *The Independent*, 26 October 1999)

Egging them on

A month earlier there was another egg story. Scientists at Leeds University have successfully reversed a (premature) menopause with ovarian grafting. While the technology offers the possibility of restoring fertility to young women with medical problems (such as sterility after cancer treatment), it could in theory allow women to bank tissue and choose to reproduce at an advanced age. (Source: *The Independent*, 24 September 1999)

UK to import Danish sperm?

Meanwhile, the men haven't been getting a look in. Or rather, British men haven't. Because sperm donations are plummeting in the UK after suggestions that donors could lose their anonymity, a leading fertility specialist has asked the UK government to lift its ban on importing

human sperm from abroad. He had a supply from Denmark lined up. (Source: *The Independent*, 6 October 1999)

Record AIDS deaths

A report from UNAIDS has predicted that a record number of people will die from AIDS in 1999 despite improved survival achieved with anti-retroviral therapies in wealthier countries. UNAIDS estimates 2.6 million deaths in 1999, 5.6 million new infections, and that 32.4 million adults and 1.2 million children will be living with AIDS. 13.7 million Africans have already died. In the West, gay men have become complacent now life-prolonging therapy is available, while in Eastern Europe and Central Asia injecting drug use has caused the world's steepest increase in HIV infection. (Source: *AIDS Epidemic Update*: December 1999, UNAIDS)

'Will to live' waxes and wanes

Canadian researchers assessed 'the will to live' twice daily in 168 mentally competent cancer patients admitted to palliative care and found substantial fluctuation 'due to changes in both physical and mental factors'. Psychological factors often weigh more heavily in a desire to die than factors such as physical pain. Palliative care helps manage reversible distress. Another nail in the coffin of the euthanasia and physician assisted suicide movements? (Source: *The Lancet*, 4 September 1999; 354:816-819)

'You shall not give false testimony . . .'

There does not seem to be much support for this Commandment amongst British medical students. In a survey '36% said that they would be prepared to cheat in exams, falsify patient information, plagiarise other people's work, or forge signatures'. (Sources: Exodus 20:16 and *British Medical Journal*, 6 November 1999; 319:1222)

'Honour your father and your mother . . .'

And Britain's aging parents don't seem to want this Commandment followed either! At a final regional conference of the millennium 'Debate of the Age' a majority agreed 'Our generation does not want to be looked after by our children. We

should not expect it.' (Sources: Exodus 20:12 and Millennium Debate of the Age Newsletter, September 1999)

Evidence-based prayer?

A double blind randomised controlled trial suggests prayer for healing does work. Researchers recruited a cross-denominational team of Christians to pray for half the patients admitted to a coronary care unit and they (unaware of the prayer) had lower scores than controls on an unvalidated instrument for measuring adverse outcomes. Length of stay was unaffected and mortality was not studied. (Source: *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 1999; 159:2273-2278)

Religion and mental health

In a Health Education Authority funded report the UK government admitted in October that religion can be good for your mental health. It quoted American studies linking religious belief and wellbeing, and suggesting that religious faith can protect against depression. (Source: *Promoting Mental Health, The Role of Faith Communities*, Health Education Authority)

Do you believe in God?

This *BMJ* 'Soundings' headline caught the eye. In a challenging piece about a young patient (who asked his doctor this question) dying badly as an unbeliever, GP Kevin Barraclough ends entertainingly: 'I am reminded of the story of the erudite theologian who was sometimes suspected by the zealots of heresy. A journalist confronted him. "Do you believe in God?" he asked. The theologian eyed him cautiously. "I can answer you," he said, "but the answer is complex, and I can promise you that you will not understand my answer. Do you want me to go ahead?" "Certainly." "All right. The answer is yes."' (Source: *British Medical Journal*, 2 October 1999; 319:929)

Euthychus