

CHICAGO LAB HELPS COUPLES CREATE MADE-TO-ORDER BABIES

Chicago Sun-Times, Jim Ritter, May 6, 2004

With the help of a Chicago genetics lab, five families have had made-to-order babies who could donate life-saving tissue to siblings with life-threatening diseases.

The work raises questions about the ethics of having a baby in order to benefit a brother or sister with such diseases as leukemia.

Nine couples underwent in vitro fertilization, in which eggs are fertilized by sperm in a lab. Chicago-based Reproductive Genetics Institute determined which embryos would genetically match older siblings for possible stem cell transplants. Matching embryos then were transferred to the women. Five got pregnant and had healthy babies.

The babies' umbilical cord blood contained perfectly matched stem cells. One sibling with anemia has undergone a successful stem cell transplant, and a second sibling with anemia is getting a transplant.

Three other siblings have leukemia, which is in remission. Stem cells from cord bloods were frozen in the event a sibling's cancer rebounds and a stem cell transplant becomes necessary.

Stem cell transplants represent "the last chance to have treatment," said Yury Verlinsky, director of the Genetics Institute and lead author of a report in today's Journal of the American Medical Association.

The Genetics Institute is a leader in "preimplantation genetic diagnosis," applied to more than 1,000 babies worldwide. In most cases, the embryos are screened for genetic diseases such as cystic fibrosis or sickle cell anemia.

Valparaiso University professor Gilbert Meileander, a member of the President's Council on Bioethics, finds screening embryos for the benefit of siblings "morally troubling." And Britain has banned genetic screening of embryos if the only purpose is to produce babies that match their siblings.

Verlinsky, though, has no qualms. He noted the parents already had decided to have another baby. So why not, he reasoned, to have a baby that could help a sibling?

Verlinsky said his method is preferable to getting pregnant and aborting fetuses that don't match.

"Parents seeking these services are typically unusually caring and attentive," Dr. Norman Fost of the University of Wisconsin wrote in an editorial in the AMA journal.

Fost added: "Of all the reasons people have babies, this would seem to be a wonderful reason. Most reasons are either mindless sex or selfish reasons."