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Health Beyond DOLLY THE HUMAN CLONING DILEMMA

Coveting a clone

Families facing infertility, death of loved one turn to cloning



Michael Gallacher / Special to MSNBC.com

Katherine Gordon visits the site near Seeley Lake, Mont., where her teenage daughter, Emily, was killed in a drunk driving accident five years ago.

By Julia Sommerfeld
MSNBC

Aug. 13 — When Katherine Gordon’s teenage daughter died in a car accident five years ago, she became obsessed with the idea of cloning her child’s genes. Cristina and Vince Revert are both infertile and see cloning as the only way they can have a child who is genetically related to them. And Liz Catalan, who suffers from premature ovarian failure, wants to bear her own child but refuses to use another woman’s egg — preferring to raise her own later-born identical twin.

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THESE PEOPLE are not narcissists out to populate the world with their likeness. Their motivations of love and loss are a far cry from the bioengineering nightmares depicted in science fiction novels and movies.

They are simply among a small but passionate group who, due to infertility or the loss of a loved one, feel that human cloning technology would fill some void in their lives.

Take the Reverts, for instance — a young, married couple in Las Vegas facing a double barrier to conceiving a child. Cristina, 30, has faulty fallopian tubes. Her husband, Vince, 34, is unable to produce sperm due to a high school football injury.

They thought they would never be able to have children together until the headlines on Dolly five years ago sparked their imagination. They see cloning as their only chance to have a genetically related child.

BRINGING BACK A CHILD

Katherine Gordon of Great Falls, Mont., whose 17-year-old daughter, Emily, was killed by a drunk driver five years ago, says she became obsessed with bringing a part of her daughter back in some way. Spurred on by the news of Dolly's birth, she had her daughter's cells frozen and stored for possible future cloning. "I started to spend all day researching on the Internet and contacting biologists," she recalls. "I really went off the deep end."

Now she's resigned herself to the fact that the technology probably won't be available in time to help her bear Emily's clone, as she's now 42. But she says that if it were possible in the next couple of years, she



What's your position on human cloning?

- There should be a complete ban.
- It should be banned for reproductive purposes, but permitted for stem cell research.
- It should be allowed without any restrictions.

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would do it.

“I know it wouldn’t be Emily — it would be her twin sister,” she says. “Emily was perfect — she was beautiful and smart, too, and most of that is genetic. Her predisposition was real kind. Even if the clone had some of her negative qualities that would be fine, too. I don’t know what the new person would be like, but she would have a good start in life.”

No matter how heartrending the Reverts’ and Gordon’s motivations, some scientists and ethicists warn that the results of reproductive cloning would be disastrous for humankind.

PROFILES

Family tree of the future



- Like mother, like daughter
- Chip off the old block
- Two moms
- Resurrecting a genome

Human cloning could offer a method of reproduction unlike anything we’ve ever known. Lesbians could have babies without any contribution from a man. A wife could give birth to her husband’s later-born “twin.” Parents could resurrect the genome of a dead child. Click on a possible scenario to see how cloning could give rise to completely new branches of the family tree.

Source: MSNBC Research
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Dr. William Hurlbut, a bioethicist at Stanford University and member of President Bush’s Council on Bioethics, urges parents to look at cloning from the perspective of the child. “I don’t think anyone should have to live their life in the footsteps of someone else,” he says. “The baby may be held up in comparison with some idealized image of the lost child. It seems morbid and insensitive to the love of the child.”

But Gregory Pence, a pro-cloning bioethicist at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, and author of “Who’s Afraid of Human Cloning?,” defends that choice. “People have replacement children all the time. It’s as good a reason as any to have a child sexually. Why are people creating children anyway? To create a sense of family, someone to take care of them when they’re older. There are many self-centered reasons people have kids, parents just normally don’t have to out these reasons.”

PROFILE

A man on a mission



Jeff Albertson / Special to MSNBC.com

Randolfe "Randy" Wicker, a former gay rights activist, spearheads the pro-human cloning movement. Wicker runs the Human Cloning Foundation, which he founded immediately after Dolly's birth was announced in 1997,

FERTILE DREAM

Liz Catalan, who does marketing for a cruise line in Miami, discovered at 36, a few years after marrying her husband, Marco, that her ovaries had stopped producing eggs. Doctors told her the only way she could get pregnant was by using a donor egg, but she is not interested in bearing another woman's child.

While doing infertility research she came across information on cloning and realized that this would offer her the only opportunity to bear a "biological" child. Catalan sent her records to Dr. Panos Zavos, a fertility doctor in Kentucky who has announced plans to clone a baby within a year, to get on his waiting list.

Marco and Liz Catalan, of Miami, argue that cloning should be viewed as a reproductive right for people who couldn't otherwise conceive a genetically related child.



“Some people who are saying no — either for reproductive or for cloning stem cells for research —

they would have a different opinion if they were in our situations,” Catalan says.

Hurlbut, however, opposes cloning even in cases of infertility. “We shouldn’t say reproduction is an absolute right. It’s not something you can do at all costs,” he says.

He envisions a variety of scenarios for how this could end badly. The child may not have the total loyalty of the non-related parent, or perhaps the genetic donor may have an excessive sense of propriety. A far-out possibility, but one that still should be considered, he says, is what if the unrelated parent of the opposite sex had some attraction to the clone — imagine having a young daughter in the house who looks just like mom did when her husband fell in love with her.

Pence dismisses that argument: “That’s ridiculous — a lot of daughters look like their mothers. It’s a genetic fatalism argument, like we can’t control ourselves.”

Each of these criticisms is extremely speculative, says Pence, who instead offers some more positive musings: “Maybe the kid will be really happy — the child knows the parents really, really wanted him the way he is. ... It could also make a family stronger — it’s going to be very hard to walk away from that child.”

‘YEAR OF THE CLONES’

Even as the debate continues, a few maverick scientists claim that we’re on the brink of seeing a human clone. Zavos proclaimed to Congress in May that “2002 will be the year of the clones.”

Italian fertility specialist Dr. Severino Antinori — best known for impregnating a 63-year-old woman — announced earlier this year that he knows of three women pregnant with cloned embryos but has declined to give further details. And French chemist Brigitte Boisselier, head of Clonaid, the laboratory arm of an alien-loving religious outfit known as the Raelians, says her secret lab has cloned human embryos.

Art Caplan, director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, calls Antinori, Zavos and Boisselier a “three-ring circus” and says they don’t have the skills to clone a human.

Many experts agree that serious scientific hurdles remain before human cloning will be possible. After six years of practice in animals, the majority of embryos don’t take in the womb, miscarry or die soon after birth. And animals that do survive often are born much larger than normal or with abnormal organ development.



SPARKING HOPE

While the claims of fringe scientists have struck fear among U.S. lawmakers scrambling to head off the possibility of a human clone, inquiries from people wanting them are pouring in. Boisselier says that she has several thousands of clients clamoring for a clone.

She feels that the public sentiment against cloning will be quick to turn around once a healthy baby is born, just like after the birth of the first test-tube baby. When Louise Brown was born in 1978, polls showed 85 percent of people were against the use of in vitro fertilization (similar to the 90 percent of Americans who are now against human cloning, according to a poll conducted last year). But just over 20 years later, she notes, IVF is widely accepted.

Beyond DOLLY THE HUMAN CLONING DILEMMA

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