



Is it right to grow human embryos in a petri dish for more than 14 days in the name of scientific research? A big question, but it only requires a short answer.

Yet the answer we give as a society is crucially important: it is a matter of morality, ethics – and life and death.

Our perceptions are inevitably refracted through the prism of personal experience, and so before I go any further I should admit to a vested interest. I have undergone IVF more times than I care to remember.

Having been blessed with two beautiful, wholehearted daughters aged 13 and seven, I cannot imagine the world without them, a world in which they might never have been.

I saw each of them as a tiny cluster of cells, blurred through the microscope lens because my eyes were filmed with fat tears.

Through the long years of treatment, I saw other clusters, too, embryos that were implanted but were not meant to be. I never knew why. Maybe today someone might be able to tell me.

Now my girls are here, the story of how they came to be is theirs alone to tell. But it's not a big secret and truthfully, I'm not sure how much it matters to them.

It's been a long time since we routinely referred to "test-tube babies". These days, the very term sounds clunky, out-of-date and ill-informed, redolent as it is of *Brave New World* eugenics.

The first such baby, Louise Brown, is now 37 and herself a mother. She has earned her place in history, alongside Patrick Steptoe and Sir Robert Edwards, who pioneered her conception.

Just last year, she revealed that back then her mother received blood-spattered hate mail for daring to tamper with nature. By 2013, five million IVF babies had been born worldwide.

But with around 17,000 babies a year now born through IVF – 2 per cent of the total – such children are, if not commonplace, then certainly not uncommon. Most of us know someone who has endured IVF.

In our more enlightened times, we highlight the nature of the process of in-vitro fertilisation that the mother undergoes, rather than stigmatising or labelling the resultant baby.

I have experienced enough of both infertility and the fertility industry to care deeply about what will happen in the future to women like me, to embryos like mine.

The increased success rates of IVF in recent decades – from an average live UK birth rate of 14 per cent in 1991 to 25 per cent in 2011 – are due to intensive research into both embryo development and embryo implantation.

Judith Woods

Read more
telegraph.
co.uk/opinion

Twitter
@JudithWoods

I could not have given my precious IVF embryos away

That research has brought us to the point where a team of scientists from Cambridge University and Rockefeller University New York have managed to keep a human embryo alive in a lab dish for 13 days.

Previously, there was a six-day limit because the developing egg needs to implant in a womb to remain viable. But by suspending them in a soup of chemicals, the human embryos have a

Some medical experts believe relaxing legislation, allowing two extra days to a week's further development, could help in the treatment of recurrent miscarriage and conditions such as pre-eclampsia.

But just because we can does not always mean we should.

We stand at the brink of something; but will it lead to the glorious uplands of advancement or a murky abyss of human embryos bred for research?

It begs the most fundamental question: when does life begin? Is it 24 weeks, after which abortion is illegal? Is it the moment sperm meets egg? Or is it, as many theologians believe, at 14 days when the soul enters an embryo and transforms it into a unique human being?

To the best of my knowledge, the embryos used are donated by couples who have successfully undergone IVF and have completed their family.

I was never in a position to have

potential to stay alive beyond the limit imposed by Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority legislation.

Under current law, embryos may not be grown past 14 days. When the legislation was introduced in 1990 and 2001, there was no technical possibility of breaching that limit.

It was set at that point because thereafter, the embryo begins to differentiate into the layers that will eventually become different organs.

Yet each extra day brings fresh knowledge about embryo formation, malformation and the vagaries of implantation, which is the stage at which an estimated 70 per cent of IVF cycles fail.

It begs the most fundamental question: when does life begin?

embryos left over; if there had been some frozen in storage, what would I have done? Donated them to another woman? Let them eventually perish? Or given them to researchers so that subsequently couples could have the babies they desperately wanted?

I'm not sure it would have been logical to think of those embryos as any less deserving of life just because they hadn't been transferred into a body.

And yet embryo research demonstrably gives life to others, and I see it as a force for good. It was no doubt thanks to just such research that two of my IVF cycles were ultimately successful.

I feel uncomfortable about my hesitancy. Motherhood, and perhaps medicalised, assisted motherhood, makes these important ethical issues seem less clear cut. I fear it had made a coward of me.

I believe in carefully monitored embryonic research. I just could not have given up my precious embryos to facilitate it. Does that make me sentimental, or selfish?

I have no idea, but I thank God I never had to make that choice. Any decision to extend or curtail research beyond 14 days must be carefully weighed with all the wisdom of Solomon.

...bring Ende with their