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HSG: FIL

TO: TIME MEDICINE

FROM: LONDON BY: BONNIE ANGELO

SLUG: TEST TUBE BABY

TK: 4

ECH

IN FEBRUARY, 1970 PATRICK STEPTOE CREATED A STIR IN BRITAIN WITH HIS ANNOUNCEMENT THAT THE FIRST BIRTH OF A BABY CONCEIVED OUTSIDE THE MOTHER'S BODY WAS TO TAKE PLACE SHORTLY. AS HE MADE THAT DRAMATIC ANNOUNCEMENT, DR. STEPTOE SAID, "I THINK IT IS UP TO THE PUBLIC TO TELL US IF IT IS MORAL TO GO ON."

THE DOCTOR'S SUGGESTION WAS TAKEN UP BY THE DAILY SKETCH, WHICH PRINTED SPECIAL BALLOTS FOR ITS READERS TO USE IN EXPRESSING THEIR VIEWS. THE RESULT: "NO, NO AND A THOUSAND TIMES NO," REPORTED THE SKETCH. THE VOTE RAN EIGHT TO ONE AGAINST ALLOWING SCIENCE TO PERFECT THE PROCESS OF IMPLANTING TEST TUBE CONCEPTIONS IN THE HUMAN BODY.

THIS PUBLIC REACTION DID NOT DETER DR. STEPTOE, DESPITE HIS COMMENTS, FOR HE CONTINUED, WITH DR. EDWARDS, IN THE EXPERIMENTS, WORKING WITH FOUR TO SIX WOMEN A MONTH, UP UNTIL THE PRESENT MOMENT, WHEN THE BIRTH OF THE BABY CLAIMED TO BE THE FIRST IS IMMINENT.

IN THE EIGHT YEARS WHICH HAVE PASSED, THE PUBLIC MIND HAS ACCOMMODATED A NUMBER OF SCIENTIFIC BREAKTHROUGHS AND THERE SEEMS TO BE LITTLE CURBSTONE OBJECTION TO THE UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES AROUND THE BIRTH OF BABY BROWN.

*9 Lined - 1976*

IN THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY, HOWEVER, THERE ARE CONCERNS AND OBJECTIONS. STEPTOE AND EDWARDS HAVE CAUSED CRITICISM BY THE TOTAL SECRECY IN WHICH THEY HAVE CONDUCTED THEIR WORK OVER THE PAST DECADE, PUBLISHING NOTHING AS THE EXPERIMENTS PROGRESSED, REFUSING TO ALLOW GOVERNMENT SCIENTISTS TO ENTER THEIR LABORATORIES, DOING NOTHING TO STAUNCH THE FLOW OF SENSATIONAL SPECULATION AND WHOLLY UNRELIABLE REPORTS IN THE BRITISH PRESS.

SIR JOHN STALLWORTHY, PRESIDENT OF THE BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S BOARD OF SCIENCE AND AMERITUS PROFESSOR OF GYNAECOLOGY AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY, IS ONE OUTSTANDING PROFESSIONAL WHO EXPRESSES DOUBT. HE HAS NO DOUBTS AT ALL ABOUT THE PART OF THE PROCESS DEALING WITH FERTILIZING THE EGGS IN VITRO. "THAT HAS BEEN DONE FOR A LONG TIME IN THE ANIMAL FIELD," HE SAYS. "BUT IS THERE PROOF THAT AN EGG FERTILIZED IN THE TEST TUBE HAS BEEN REPRODUCED IN THE HUMAN? THEY MUST PROVE THAT THE PREGNANCY COULD NOT HAVE OCCURRED IN THE NORMAL WAY. THIS REQUIRES IRREFUTABLE PROOF."

"IRREFUTABLE", IN HIS VIEW, IS SOMETHING MORE THAN THE DYE TEST. IRREFUTABLE IS "IF SHE HAD BOTH TUBES REMOVED, THEN NOBODY WOULD DOUBT. OR IF INFLAMMATION OF THE PELVIS HAD LEFT THE TUBES SO DISORGANIZED THAT THEY SHOULD BE REMOVED." HE NOTES THAT IN ANIMAL TESTS, THE FETUS CAN BE TAGGED, BUT NOT OF COURSE IN HUMANS.

SIR JOHN'S SKEPTICISM ARISES FROM RESEARCH HE DID IN THE FIELD OF INFERTILITY IN THE FORTIES. A CELEBRATED AMERICAN DOCTOR (THE LATE DR. RUBIN, SP?) HAD CONDUCTED STUDIES SHOWING THAT APPROXIMATELY 40 PER CENT OF ALL WOMEN WHO SOUGHT TREATMENT FOR INFERTILITY APPEARED TO HAVE BLOCKED TUBES. STALLWORTHY'S RESEARCH SHOWED THAT THE FIGURE WAS MORE ACCURATELY

PUT AT ABOUT 10 PER CENT ACTUALLY HAD ORGANIC DAMAGE TO THE TUBES, THAT THE REMAINDER SUFFERED FUNCTIONAL OCCLUSION WHICH MIGHT RESPOND TO TREATMENT, OR TO PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS. "IN SOME CASES IN WHICH SPASMOLYTICS WERE USED TO RELIEVE TENSION, YOU COULD SEE THE TUBES RELAX NORMALLY." PSYCHOLOGICAL TENSION, TOO, COULD BE A CAUSE OF INFERTILITY. HE CITED "THE WELL-KNOWN PHENOMENON" OF WOMEN WHO COULD NOT CONCEIVE HAVING A BABY AT CHANGE OF LIFE, AND OF WOMEN WHO CONCEIVE AFTER THEY HAVE ADOPTED A CHILD.

"IT IS OF TREMENDOUS IMPORTANCE THAT THERE BE IRREFUTABLE PROOF THAT PREGNANCY COULD NOT OCCUR," SIR JOHN EMPHASIZED. ONE THING THAT TROUBLES HIM MOST IS THE REPORT, WHICH APPEARED IN THE PRESS LAST WEEK (BUT NOT THE DAILY MAIL, WHICH HOLDS ALL THE CARDS) SUGGESTING THAT THE DATE OF THE BIRTH WAS IN QUESTION, AND MIGHT BE SOONER THAN EXPECTED. "IN THE TEST TUBE PROCESS," HE POINTED OUT, "YOU KNOW THE EXACT DATE THAT THE BABY STARTED IN THE TUBE. YOU KNOW THE EXACT DATE WHEN THE WOMAN OVULATED. YOU KNOW EXACTLY." (THE WORKING DATE IS AUG. 4, THUS SIR JOHN SUGGESTS THAT IF THERE IS MUCH DEVIATION FROM THAT DATE, IT CASTS DOUBTS.)

BEARING ON THE POINT RAISED BY SIR JOHN IS THIS STEPTOE CASE HISTORY. I TALKED WITH MRS. SYLVIA ALLEN, 44, OF BOLTON, LANCASHIRE, WHO WAS ONE OF STEPTOE'S PATIENTS IN 1970. "I WENT IN FOR AN IMPLANT," SHE SAID. "THE EGG WAS PERFECT. IT DIVIDED SEVERAL TIMES. THEN MR. STEPTOE CAME INTO MY ROOM AND SAID, "I'M SORRY, THE EGG IS FINE, BUT WE ARE NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO IMPLANT IT." HE HAD FOUND A FIBROID TUMOR ON THE OUTSIDE OF MY WOMB, AND A CYST ON THE OVARY, WHICH MEANT A MAJOR OPERATION. BUT WHEN THEY WERE DOING THE OPERATION, THEY OPERATED ON THE FALLOPIAN TUBES AS WELL. MR. STEPTOE SAID THEY HAD BEEN ABLE TO OPEN THE TUBES, AND THAT I SHOULD BE ABLE

PAGE 4 LN66

TO CONCEIVE NORMALLY." SHE DID NOT, HOWEVER, CONCEIVE LATER, BUT DECIDED "NOT TO VOLUNTTER FOR ANY MORE OPERATIONS -- I THOUGHT IT BEST TO SIT BACK AND LET OTHER PEOPLE BE THE GUINEA PIGS."

ALTHOUGH STEPTOE AND EDWARDS REPORTEDLY HAVE DEALT WITH AS MANY AS 400 WOMEN IN THEIR YEARS OF PERFECTING THEIR PROCESS, THEIR WORK HAS BEEN CLOAKED IN SECRECY, AND VIRTUALLY NONE OF THEIR FORMER PATIENTS HAVE SURFACED FOR ANY COMMENT OR ANY FOLLOW-UP.

WE WERE ABLE TO TRACK MRS. ALLEN DOWN WITH SOME EFFORT. SHE SAYS OF THE UNIQUE PROCESS SHE PARTICIPATED IN, "NO, IT WAS NOT PAINFUL. THE ONLY PAINFUL PART WAS THE WAITING TO SEE IF IT WOULD WORK. THE PAINFUL PART WAS BEING ON TENTERHOOKS." SHE WAS WARNED OF THE PUBLICITY THAT WOULD ENGULF HHER, BUT THERE WAS NO SUGGESTION OF MORAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS. SHE FEELS VERY WARMLY TOWARD DR. STEPTOE, WHO WAS A "VERY COMFORTING" PHYSICIAN. "I HAVEN'T BEEN IN TOUCH WITH HIM IN SOME TIME, BUT IF THIS ONE WORKS, I SHALL CALL HIM TO CONGRATULATE HIM."

STEPTOE AND EDWARDS' SCIENTIFIC COLLEAGUES WILL JOIN HIS FORMER PATIENTS IN CONGRATULATING THEM IF THE BIRTH IS A SUCCESS -- BUT THAT DOES NOT REMOVE THE MIASMA OF SUSPICION AND PROFESSIONAL DISDAIN FOR THE WAY IN WHICH THEY HAVE CONDUCTED THEIR WORK. "I DO DEPLORE THE LACK OF SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE," COMMENTS SIR JOHN. DR. RONALD BARNES, SCIENTIST WITH THE CLINICAL RESEARCH CENTER (CAP C,R,C), HARROW, MIDDLESEX, ONE OF TWO INSTITUTES FOUNDED BY BRITAIN'S MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (CAP H,R,C), WHICH PARALLELS THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF HEALTH IN THE

U.S., TAKES AN EVEN STRONGER VIEW. A SPECIALIST IN WHICH FIELD OF RESEARCH, HE MAINTAINS THAT EXPERIMENTATION IN IMPLANTING IN VITRO FETUSES IN HUMANS SHOULD BE HALTED UNTIL MOR WORK HAS BEEN DONE ON LABORATORY ANIMALS. HE NOTES THAT FOUR YEARS AGO THE MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL STOPPED ALL SUPPORT FOR THE STEPTOE/EDWARDS PROJECT.

"SIX YEARS AGO WE STARTED TO LOOK AT THE FEASIBILITY OF DOING EXPERIMENTATION IN THIS FIELD. WE STARTED WITH RABBITS AND MICE. AS WE GOT INTO IT, WE HAD SUFFICIENT RED LIGHTS COMING ON THAT WE STOPPED THE HUMAN PROGRAMS WE HAD PLANNED."

BARNES EXPRESSES THE RESERVATIONS VOICED PRIVATELY BY SCIENTISTS WHO DO NOT WANT TO MAKE PUBLIC COMMENT. "I WOULDN'T MIND IF THEY STOOD UP AND SAID, 'THIS IS THE WAY WE DID IT. BUT THEY HAVE NOT PUBLISHED ANY INFORMATION. WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN DOING, NOBODY KNOWS. WE READ THAT THEY HAVE WORKED WITH OVER 400 WOMEN. IF THAT IS SO, WILL THIS BIRTH BE JUST GOOD LUCK OR HAVE THEY PERFECTED THE TECHNIQUE. YOU'VE GOT TO WEIGH THE ONE SUCCESS AGAINST WHAT HAPPENED TO THE 400. I PRAY THAT THE BABY WILL BE FINE -- AND I'LL CONGRATULATE THEM -- BUT AT THIS STAGE I WOULDN'T LIKE TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH A PROGRAM BASED ON THE WAY THEY ARE DOING IT.'" DR. BARNES AND AN AMERICAN ASSOCIATE WORKING ON THEIR ANIMAL EXPERIMENTS AT THE CLINICAL RESEARCH CENTER ASKED STEPTOE AND EDWARDS TO LET THEM VISIT THEIR LABORATORY. "THEY REFUSED TO LET US IN."

SOME QUESTIONS RAISED WITHIN THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY: ARE THEY FIRST TRYING TO CORRECT THE INFERTILITY BY TUBAL SURGERY? HAS IMPLANTING BEEN DONE ON WOMEN WHO WERE SCHEDULED FOR LATER ELECTIVE HYSTERECTOMIES? WHERE HAS THE MONEY COME FROM TO PAY FOR THIS EXPERIMENTATION? AND, AGAIN AND AGAIN, WHY THE SECRECY,

PAGE 6 LN66

VEILING THEIR WORK EVEN FROM THE MOST RESPONSIBLE MEDICAL COLLEAGUES, WHILE ALLOWING A POP TABLOID TO CORNER EXCLUSIVE RIGHTS.

DR. BARNES' ANIMAL RESEARCH LED HIM TO WRITE, IN A MEDICAL JOURNAL "PULSE", THAT TESTS HAS SHOWN "A FAR HIGHER INCIDENCE" OF TRIPLOIDY, AN ABNORMAL CHROMOSOME SITUATION IN TEST TUBE FETUSES THAN IN NORMAL MICE FETUSES. "THIS IS PARTICULARLY WORRYING BECAUSE OF ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANS," HE COMMENTS. (HOWEVER, SINCE ABNORMALITIES CAN OFTEN BE DETECTED BY TESTS BEFORE BIRTH, IT WOULD SEEM LIKELY THAT STEPTOE IS CONFIDENT THAT THIS FETUS SOUNDS AND LOOKS RIGHT.)

BARNES POINTS OUT THAT THE ONLY ONE AUTHENTICATED PREGNANCY RESULTING FROM AN IMPLANTED FETUS, IT WAS THE ONE DESCRIBED BY STEPTOE AND EDWARDS IN THE LANCET ARTICLE PACKETED YESTERDAY, THAT RESULTED IN AN ECTOPIC SITE AND FETAL DEATH. "THAT IS A FRIGHTENING THING," SAID DR. BARNES. "ABORTIONS ARE SIMPLE. ECTOPY IS RED LIGHTS. HOW MANY OF THE 400 HAVE HAD THEM?"

DR. BARNES STRESSES THAT HE DOES NOT ALLEGE MALPRACTICE AGAINST STEPTOE AND EDWARDS, BUT SIMPLY FEELS THAT MORE EXPERIMENTATION IN ANIMALS WOULD BE WISE.

THE BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S ETHICS COMMITTEE TAKES A LEVEL VIEW OF THE STEPTOE-EDWARDS WORK. "SAYS DR. JOHN DAWSON, SPOKESMAN AND SECRETARY OF THE COMMITTEE, "ETHICALLY, THIS IS A STRAIGHTFORWARD ISSUE. SOCIETY MAY HAVE MUCH TO SAY, SINCE THIS WORK IS AN INTERFACE BETWEEN MEDICAL ETHICS AND SOCIAL ETHICS. THEIR TECHNIQUE IS VERY STRAIGHTFORWARD ETHICALLY. THE DOCTOR'S DUTY IS TO ACT IN THE BEST INTEREST OF HIS PATIENT. WHERE IT IS A MOTHER AND CHILD, HE MUST ACT IN THE BEST INTEREST

PAGE 7 LN66

OF THE WOMAN, BUT ALSO ACT WITH NO FORSEEABLE DETRIMENT TO THE CHILD. THIS IN-VITRO FERTILIZATION IS A STRAIGHTFORWARD APPLICATION OF MEDICAL SKILLS TO HELP A WOMAN WHO IS INFERTILE. THERE IS NO LEGAL PROBLEM OF LEGITIMACY, NO ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION DONOR, NO HOST MOTHER, NOBODY OUTSIDE THE COUPLE INVOLVED. WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT IS SIMPLY GETTING A FERTILIZED OVUM PAST A BLOCK IN THE TUBE. ''

DR. DAWSON SEES PROBLEMS THAT CAN LIE AHEAD AS THIS TECHNIQUE IS PERFECTED. ''IF YOU CAN TELL GENETIC DEFECTS, IS IT PROPER THEN TO DESTROY THE EMBRYO? THAT WILL HAVE IMPLICATIONS FOR SOME GROUPS, PARTICULARLY CATHOLIC COUPLES. WITH AN EXTENSION OF THE TECHNIQUE, IT IS POSSIBLE TO REMOVE SOME OF THE CELLS AND REPLACE THEM WITH OTHERS -- THAT IS, MODIFY THE EMBRYO. THIS RAISES A WHOLE DIFFERENT SET OF QUESTIONS. IT IS SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY FROM THE SITUATION WE ARE CONSIDERING TODAY. ''

END TAKE

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