

# Bonnie Steinbock: UAlbany's Ethics Expert

Meet UAlbany's very own ethicist: Professor of Philosophy Bonnie Steinbock.

Internationally recognized for her expertise on biomedical ethics, particularly in the fields of reproduction and genetics, she draws upon her vast knowledge of philosophy, public policy, law and medicine in assessing such ethical matters as physician-assisted suicide, abortion, human cloning, surrogate motherhood, genetic testing and drunk driving.

Steinbock, a 2005 recipient of the University at Albany's Award for Excellence in Research, is widely respected for her ability to explain technically difficult topics to the general public. Her 1992 work *Life Before Birth: The Moral and Legal Status of Embryos*, drew praise from the editors of the journal *Bioethics*, who noted, "One of the book's major successes is its simultaneous address of both philosophical and lay audiences." In addition, Steinbock has written 60 articles – an impressive number for a philosopher – and has appeared on PBS, CBS, Court TV, A&E, the Canadian Broadcasting Company and Japanese Public Television, commenting on frozen embryos, stem cell research and other topical issues.

A University at Albany faculty member since 1977, Steinbock teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in ethics, bioethics and philosophy of law, as well as graduate courses in public policy and public health. She also directs the University's interdisciplinary minor in bioethics.

## Why I Reject the Created/Spare Distinction

By Bonnie Steinbock

**E**mbryonic stem cell research pits their therapeutic promise against the destruction of very early human life, because the derivation of embryonic stem cells destroys the embryo in the process. Some people are adamantly opposed to such research because they regard embryos as human beings, just like you and me. If embryos have this moral status, then research that kills them cannot be justified, no matter how promising. Others see a huge difference between the very early embryo and the rest of us. At the blastocyst stage, the embryo is a clump of undifferentiated cells, about the size of the period at the end of this sentence. It has no organs, no brain; it has not even acquired the primitive streak that is the precursor of a nervous system. For this reason, Senator Orrin Hatch, as anti-abortion as they come, favors embryonic stem cell research, saying "a frozen embryo stored in a refrigerator in a clinic just isn't the same as a fetus developing in a mother's womb."

One attempt to find a compromise between the opposing sides is based on the "created/spare distinction," espoused by the National Bioethics Advisory Commission and enacted into law in Canada. According to the distinction, it is ethically permissible to derive embryonic stem cells from IVF embryos that were originally created for reproductive purposes, but no longer needed or desired by the couples who created them. The reason is that the vast majority of these "spare" embryos will eventually be discarded, thawed, and allowed to die. Using them in potentially beneficial, possibly life-saving research is better than just throwing them away. By contrast, according to this distinction, it is unethical to create embryos for research purposes because this "instrumentalizes" embryos, treating them as mere objects, as mere means to our ends.

The trouble with this argument is that it fails to recognize that in both cases, IVF and research, embryos are created for our purposes. If it is wrong to create embryos that will be destroyed, this applies not merely to embryos created for research, but also to embryos created for reproduction. If one takes seriously the notion of protecting the lives of extracorporeal embryos, then one ought not to create any surplus embryos. The number of eggs to be fertilized should be limited to the number of embryos that can be safely implanted in the woman's uterus at one time (this is the law in Italy). Of course, this would be very detrimental to infertile couples, since if the woman does not become pregnant, or loses the pregnancy, she will have to undergo the physical burden and expense of additional rounds of superovulatory drugs.

What justifies the creation and destruction of surplus embryos in IVF is that this promotes a very valuable end: reproduction. However, medical research that has the potential to prolong and improve people's lives is at least as valuable as enabling infertile people to become parents. If reproduction justifies the creation and destruction of human embryos, so does important scientific research. This is the reason for rejecting the created/spare distinction.

Of course, if embryos were persons, it would be a completely different story. But does anyone really regard embryos as persons? Suppose a fire broke out in an infertility clinic where 100 frozen embryos were stored. Imagine that a six-month-old baby was trapped in the clinic and you could either save one baby or 100 embryos, but not both. Would the fact that there were ten times as many embryos give you even a moment's hesitation?

If embryos are not persons, then we are not barred from using them for our ends. At the same time, embryos are not just "stuff." As a developing form of human life, they deserve special respect. Respect for embryos rules out frivolous or trivial uses, such as using them to create jewelry or cosmetics, or in a high school biology class. These are situations in which there is no need to use human embryos and their use displays contempt rather than respect for human life. However, respect for human life does not rule out significant research that could cure devastating diseases or save lives -- indeed, quite the contrary.

