



DEFINING THE TERMS

Manipulating the meanings of words

*"Words strain, crack and sometimes break under the burden;
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish;
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place; will not stay still."
T.S. Eliot*

Understanding what words mean is essential to proper communication of ideas. Recently, words and definitions of words have been under assault by those who want to manipulate the issues. For instance, most of us used to think the word "gay" was to be happy, ebullient, but now it describes the homosexual lifestyle. I often wonder how our founding fathers would deal with the "evolution of words." Even the word "life" used in the Declaration of Independence has come to mean something different than what the framers of our Constitution knew. *Roe v. Wade* twisted the term "life" into "viable life" and changed our society forever.

Recently, the debate on cloning has been in the forefront of our consciousness. Scientists soon discovered that the term "cloning" had an adverse effect on the populace. People were nervous about clones so scientists and researchers promptly changed the terminology to somatic cell nuclear transfer--- the scientific descriptive terminology for cloning in order to dissuade the public's aversion to cloning humans. They then determined that people were really most skittish about clones running around so they devised the term "therapeutic cloning," a process by which a human embryo would be created in the laboratory but killed to harvest its stem cells. Science reasoned that as long as the embryo was not implanted into a woman's uterus, a clone had not been created. Parsing their words carefully, the media and others used terms like "fertilized egg," "early stem cells," and "clump of cells" to confuse the public and condition them to accept science's latest junket into the "brave new world."

HB 2098 is a bill that defines cloning terms so that everyone is talking about the same thing; it would eliminate some of the controversy and confusion, and it would give the public a level playing field. The terms defined are taken from the President's Council on Bioethics established in 2001. This council is comprised of a diverse group of scientists, ethicists and doctors who represent every point of view in the cloning wars. A list of the members and their resumes may be found at: <http://bioethicsprint.bioethics.gov/about/members.html>. This group could not agree on much *except* the cloning definitions used in this bill. The bill is very straightforward; it merely establishes scientific definitions that keep the debate free from confusion. At its hearing in the House Health and Human Services Committee, several opponents stated that the bill would "put bad definitions into statute for future use." Duane Simpson, spokesman for the Biotechnology Industry

Organization, stated, "The definitions used come from political activists and political appointees." Ironically the legislative oversight for the cloning issue agreed upon last session was recently usurped by the executive branch and political appointees are now in place to regulate this very controversial science. Because of the politicization of oversight the scientific definitions for cloning and SCNT are essential to make sure that the public is not deceived.

Comparison

A comparison of the cloning definitions in the bill and those adopted by the National Institutes of Health show that **HB 2098's** definitions are not political but scientific.

The bill defines a "cloned embryo" as an embryo "arising from the somatic cell nuclear transfer process as contrasted with an embryo arising from the union of egg and sperm." The NIH defines a clone as "an animal produced by somatic cell nuclear transfer." Somatic cell nuclear transfer is a "technique that combines an enucleated egg and the nucleus of a somatic cell to make an **embryo**." [Emphasis Added] The term "blastocyst", a term often used by the media to imply that it is something other than a human embryo, is defined in the bill as "the name used for an organism at the blastocyst stage of development." The NIH glossary defines it as a "pre-implantation [when the embryo attaches itself to the lining of the uterus] embryo of about 150 cells produced by cell division following fertilization . . ." "Preimplantation is defined as an "embryo that has not yet implanted in the wall of the uterus." It goes on to say that [human embryonic stem cells] "are derived from preimplantation state embryos . . ." The term "totipotent" as defined by the bill is "a cell with an unlimited developmental potential, such as the zygote and the cells of the very early embryo, each of which is capable of giving rise to (1) a complete adult organism and of its tissues and organs, as well as (2) the fetal portion of the placenta." The NIH defines "totipotent" as "a cell that can give rise to all the cell types that make up the body plus all of the cell types that make up the extraembryonic tissues such as the placenta."

Respect for words

Dag Hammarskjöld, former head of the United Nations, said this in 1955: "Respect for the word is the first commandment in the discipline by which a man can be educated to maturity---intellectual, emotional, and moral." He went on to say: "Respect for the word---to employ it with scrupulous care and an incorruptible heartfelt love of truth---is essential if there is to be any growth in a society or in the human race." **HB 2098** ensures respect for scientific terminology and is essential if we are to make sure that science does not progress to a point where human life is no longer valued except as a natural resource.