

### The PGD Test: Pass or fail?

Carrie Gordon Earll

There was a time when the ability of parents to choose the individual characteristics of their children was limited to adoption. Adopting parents may consider genetic characteristics such as gender, hair color and perhaps family medical history. More recently, gamete donor profiles have provided insight when used in assisted reproduction. However, the current pinnacle in early genetic knowledge is pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, or PGD.

The use of PGD is controversial. Last July, the [President's Council on Bioethics](#) recommended a federal review of PGD practices due to ethical concerns

PGD could also be an acronym for another way to describe this embryo-screening technique: “pre-implantation genetic *discrimination*,” as the ultimate goal is the genetic measure of some embryos against others.

Whether the PGD criteria is based on what the embryo has (desired tissue type) or doesn't have (absence of a genetic disorder), at least two dominant concerns surface: first, the moral status of the human embryo, and second, giving parents the ability to genetically shape their children.

Public opinion regarding the embryo's moral status is divided. A *Newsweek* poll released June 2 finds that nearly one-half of Americans believe that human life begins at fertilization, at the same time that one-half consider it acceptable to destroy frozen *in vitro fertilization* (IVF) embryos with parental consent.

However, the success of IVF demonstrates that the human embryo is a genetically distinct human life capable of development and self-integration. Embryos are young humans with the same genetic composition as the rest of us. Most would agree that the embryo warrants respect, yet PGD allows the sorting of embryos like socks in a chest of drawers during spring cleaning — keeping the ones that look good and tossing the rest.

The development of alternatives to PGD, such as intensifying research into methods of expanded gamete screening or being satisfied with parent carrier screening, would attempt to address the embryo's moral standing yet, leaves unresolved the dilemma of parental influence in determining a child's genetic structure.

As the maxim goes, hard cases make bad law. Examples of human suffering that cry out for amelioration may construct a hard case for PGD. Yet, as is seen time and again,

technologies developed for one purpose can be used for others and historically the courts are reluctant to limit such access.

PGD propels us toward a mindset where we, as the President's Council writes, consider children "more like products of a designed manufacturing process than 'gifts' whom their parents are prepared to accept as they are." Parents using PGD for either negative or positive genetic screening may want to add to their family, but PGD precludes the welcoming of just any child; the goal is one with specific characteristics.

And, what does PGD say to future generations? Children born by this process will one day learn that they passed the genetic examination while their embryonic siblings did not make the cut, becoming life's earliest and perhaps most costly lesson in the importance of passing a test.

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