

Survey: Tests of Embryos OK for Health Purposes

BY KATE JOHNSON
Montreal Bureau

About two-thirds of Americans support the use of genetic testing of embryos during in vitro fertilization to avoid the birth of a child with a fatal disease, but fewer than 30% support its hypothetical use for selecting intelligence or strength, according to a report from the Genetics and Public Policy Center in Washington.

A "majority of Americans think that testing for health-related purposes is an appropriate use of reproductive genetic testing, but only a minority support its use for trait selection," noted the report entitled "Reproductive Genetic Testing: What America Thinks."

The report touches on the more textured differences and similarities in opinion concerning these issues among the American public. It describes the political debate over reproductive genetic testing as

framed by two polarized views, whereas the views of most Americans "are more nuanced and elastic, reflecting the tensions among hopes, values, and personal experience."

"Public debate and media coverage of reproductive genetic technologies hide a surprising level of concordance among Americans for using genetic testing to identify risks of disease," observed Kathy Hudson, director of the center, in a written statement.

The research included 21 focus groups, 62 in-depth interviews, surveys of more than 6,000 people, and both in-person and online town hall meetings.

The study authors noted that respondents' awareness about preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) was very low.

"While most participants had heard of genetic testing at some level, the pace of technology in this field rapidly has outstripped public awareness," the report noted. When asked whether they had heard of various technologies before that day, only 40% of participants had heard of PGD. A total of 83% said they were aware

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of prenatal testing, 90% had heard of in vitro fertilization (IVF), and 97% had heard of cloning.

When asked about the statement "Reproductive genetic technology will inevitably lead to genetic enhancement and designer babies," 75% of participants said they agreed. Yet participants were clear that it is not the technologies themselves that they fear, but rather that "unrestrained human selfishness and vanity will drive people to use reproductive genetic testing inappropriately," noted the authors. "They believed that the technology is being developed for good purposes, but human vices will result in consumer demand for capricious uses."


The study reports that 84% of participants were concerned about reproductive technologies being unregulated; however, 70% also were concerned "about government regulators invading private reproductive decisions."

A companion report entitled "Reproductive Genetic Testing: Issues and Options for Policymakers" explores various options for overseeing the use, cost, access, and safety of reproductive genetic testing. ■

Both reports are available at www.dnapolicy.org.

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Public Awareness of Reproductive Genetic Technologies

