

Human-animal hybrid and chimera embryos

Veronica English

Deputy Head of Medical Ethics

Putting the issue in context

HFE Act 1990 permits ...

- use of human embryos for research up to 14 days after fertilisation
- the creation of human embryos for research ... subject to licensing by the HFEA

Should there be more restrictions placed on research using human-animal embryos than on fully human embryos?

The approach to human embryo research

- Moral status of the embryo – matter of belief not fact
- 1990 Act takes a “gradualist approach”
- Human embryo has a “special status” but research is permitted subject to licensing
- Should research using human-animal hybrid embryos be prohibited or regulated?

Moral status of human-animal hybrid/chimera embryos

- Moral status of human-animal hybrid embryos – matter of belief not fact
- Should hybrid embryos have greater moral status than human embryos?
- Or lower moral status and less protection?
- Or, given uncertainty about moral status, subject to the same protection and regulation as human embryos?

Human dignity

- Difficult concept open to different interpretation
- No clear definition of what “human dignity” is or who it applies to
- Commonly understood to apply to persons after birth
- Human material should not be treated in an undignified manner

Blurring the boundaries between humans and animals

- Is this problematic?
- Not a new concept (e.g. Down mouse, use of pig valves for transplantation, hamster-oocyte penetration test)
- What are the morally significant differences between these uses and the use of hybrid embryos for research?

Public concerns

- “Yuk factor” as an amber light
- The role of public consultation in education – what is proposed, for what reason and with what safeguards?
- Public consultation not about numbers but about arguments
- The need for consistency in decision-making

Why should research using human-animal hybrid embryos be permitted?

- Moral imperative to pursue research that could reduce human suffering unless there are good ethical and rational arguments against it
- No good reasons to impose more restrictions on the use of human-animal embryos than on fully human embryos
- We can be confident that, using the existing regulatory mechanism, research can be pursued responsibly and subject to monitoring and control