



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

PROBLEMS OF THE COLLECTION AND HANDLING OF HUMAN SEMINAL LIQUID FOR DIAGNOSTIC PURPOSES

(5th May 1991)

abstract

The opinion analyses the bioethical aspects connected to the collection and handling of human seminal liquid for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes relative to the person, without going into the ethical debate on assisted fertilisation. The subject has taken on particular importance due to the growing attention given to the problem of male sterility, which in the past was scientifically underestimated or culturally refused.

The NBC first of all highlights the fact that, despite this different scientific and cultural awareness, often the female part of the couple is allowed to access assisted fertilisation procedures, before and independently of having tried the necessary diagnostic-therapeutic procedures aimed at improving the spermatogenesis. In this sense, assisted fertilisation does not represent the cure for male sterility, but may possibly be the cure for the sterility of the couple, while the real basic pathological state, that is low sperm count, is not dealt with.

The collection of the semen by masturbation can involve problems and anxiety of a psychological, moral and also religious nature. Even though recognising the moral extraneousness of the health care worker with respect to the problem of semen collection, the ethical and religious convictions and the personal dignity of the patient must be fully respected. Complete information must be guaranteed on the various scientifically valid semen collection methods, to which the patient must give his own informed consent.

With regard to semen handling, the Committee considers that it is necessary to carry out preliminary tests to ascertain the quality of the semen and to exclude the presence of harmful agents, such as bacteria or viruses.

It recommends furthermore that the seminal liquid undergo tests to ascertain its fertility index, in order to avoid undergoing onerous fertilisation procedures without any reasonable possibility of success, which are sometimes clinically risky and often psychologically frustrating. Starting with the consideration of the human embryo as a subject from the moment of conception, for some members of the NBC the fertilisation of human oocytes only for diagnostic purposes, or that is without the product of such fertilisation being destined for transfer into the womb, is ethically problematic. The Committee considers that hybridization tests and interspecies fertilisation procedures are unethical. The freedom of the doctor who refuses to carry out some of the procedures relative to the sperm test due to personal reasons must be safeguarded.

In the appendix the document includes the opinion approved by the Santosuosso Commission, which states that interspecific fertilisation experiments are unlawful, and the opposite opinion of a minority group of the same Commission that acknowledges the lawfulness of this type of experiment on condition that the development of the hybrid embryo be stopped in the first stages of development.