Alarms over genetic control of embryos

Sir, we are writing in regard to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority's recent consultation on what it calls "mitochondrial replacement", about which we have a number of serious ethical concerns. In the procedures being proposed, the chromosomal material from unfertilised eggs or newly conceived embryos is, in fact, replaced, and these are clearly examples, therefore, of germ-line genetic manipulation. The replacement of the egg or embryo will have an altered genetic composition that will be inheritable. It would be the first time such intentional genetic modifications of children and their descendants were expressly permitted and would open the door to further genetic alterations of human beings with unforeseen consequences.

Chromosomal replacement would cross the Rubicon into germ-line genetic interventions. Moreover, we are concerned that these proposals for research and possible treatment which remain untested and greatly increase the possibilities for the exploitation of egg donors.

Because of the implications for all of humanity, including germ-line modifications in embryos, we have written to every national legislation that has considered this issue. We are also concerned that this is a matter of international concern as the Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, which prohibits the genetic modification of spermatozoa or ova for procreation.

We urge the Government to consider its international responsibilities. This is because proposals for genetic modification of human beings, if subsequently revealed, will be detrimental to our travel and have an impact on future generations. For that reason, it is incumbent upon the Government to ensure that the full implications of any future policy are fully considered.

PETER DAVIES
Long Ditton, Surrey

Sir, I was concerned to hear that H. Grant, the face of the Hacked Off campaign, has written a letter that he never reads a newspaper.

Why are politicians allowing policy to be influenced by somebody who disregards the good that newspapers and free press do for our society? It is also a concern that many MPs cite the views of the victims of phone hacking as the chief consideration when drafting these bills. This is not how a liberal democracy works. It is important that victims are treated with compassion, we do not afford the victims of other crimes a key role in the perpetrators' sentences, and quite rightly.

ALICE SHARP
London SW11

Sir, The argument for future press regulation is that it is not simply about freedom but also about accountability. The press has an important role to play in holding the government to account, yet past press behaviour has done the opposite, necessitating the need for robust frameworks to hold that powerful interest to account. If the press remains irresponsible, it has only itself to blame for having done a disservice to democracy in the UK.

ANDREW BOYD
London W13

Hugh Grant, the face of Hacked Off which has helped to shape the new
press regulation issue has been a deep disappointment. Every reader, politician and director of the Hacked Off campaign is criticising the proposals from the Leveson report.

You seem to be suggesting, "the time for arguing against these proposals is not now." I think we are all agreed that large-scale abuses are rare and that our interest in the future of the newspaper industry is not a one-off event, but rather a long and complex process.

Therefore, I believe that you are out of touch with our readers on this issue. The news will not be a surprise, but a reflection of the proposed new arrangements.

JAMES BLOOMER
Brindley Place, Birmingham

Sir, I would like to support the concerns expressed by John O'Neill (Letters, March 11) regarding the danger of allowing "mitochondrial replacement" to take place without any legal restraints.

I believe that it is the duty of all concerned to ensure that our legal systems are robust and effective in protecting the interests of all citizens.

PETER DAVIES
Long Ditton, Surrey

Sir, I am writing in response to the letter from H. Grant, the face of the Hacked Off campaign, which highlights the importance of the free press in holding the government to account.

Personally, I believe that the free press is essential for a healthy democracy. It is through the free press that the public can be kept informed and aware of the actions of their government.

KAREN SMITH
London NW1

Sir, The role of the press in a democracy is crucial. It is not only to provide information, but also to hold the government and political parties accountable.

In the current climate, the press has a greater responsibility to ensure that the public is well-informed about the issues that affect their lives.

SOPHIE DOUGLAS
London SW11

Science investment is key to growth

Sir, Britain is walking an economic tightrope. To reach the full potential of science and innovation must be the main goal. The spirit of entrepreneurship and skills which our scientists and engineers possess are a valuable asset that generates significant benefit to the UK economy and improves our lives in many ways.

Nevertheless, we look to all parties, and today's Budget, for a long-term and sustained increase in science investment.

SIR JOSEPH PEARSON
London W1

Speeding up help for the dying

Sir, We are dismayed by the recommendation of the Select Committee on Social Security and the Inland Revenue to withdraw funding for the End of Life Care Programme. Such a move is not only unjust, but also puts the lives of people with terminal illnesses at risk.

The End of Life Care Programme provides essential support and care to people in the final stages of their lives. It is a vital service that enables people to die with dignity and comfort. To withdraw funding from this programme would be a serious mistake.

SIR JOHN GRAY
London SW11

Corrections and Clarifications

The Times welcomes correction of errors. If you believe that a story contains an error, please contact us immediately. We will make every effort to correct any inaccuracies in a timely manner.