

Gender Selection and Medicare Funding

Democratic Labor Party senator, John Madigan, has introduced a bill to prevent Medicare funding for abortions based on gender selection. The response from the media has been one that has largely dismissed the bill as a chance to reignite the abortion debate. Whatever your response may be it is worth remembering that **when asked about the morality of abortion to choose a child's sex only 7% of Australians approved.** *

Whatever the motive of the bill, opponents, by aligning with women's rights on this issue may in fact accidentally jump the fence into another more contentious issue. A society that allows for abortion and child selection based on non-health issues like gender begins to look like a society in favour of eugenics. Eugenics, which advocates for practices that may improve the genetic composition of a population, is highlighted by such atrocities as racial segregation, forced abortion and genocide.

In countries like China and India where strong cultural pressures to have boys exist, abortions of healthy girls is commonplace. Many consider the "one child policy" in China and the resultant practice of voluntary and forced abortions and sterilisations to be a human rights violation against millions of people. You don't have to be a feminist to realise that being female is not a birth defect. **This kind of practice reinforces sex-discrimination in its purest form.**

The last time that abortion for gender selection grabbed the headlines was in 2011 when a Victorian couple aborted male twins and sought to have a girl through IVF. After being rejected because of Victorian IVF guidelines they took the case to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. The case made international headlines with there being a general outcry against the notion of gender selection.

In the USA, where gender selection is legal, the public opinion is still largely against the idea of using genetic screening to select a child's sex. One IVF clinic that actively advertised that their services could be used to assure you got the child you desired backed down after a massive public backlash.

Allowing sex selection morally aligns with some eugenic principles. In being quick to reject the senator's bill based on women's rights we may be inadvertently siding with principles more akin to human rights violations largely condemned by the western world. Whilst abortion has become largely accepted in Australia, gender selection has not.

The Australian Reproductive and Health Alliance in Australia found that most people are in favour of the right to an abortion (80%). However 40% of Australians disagree with the idea that "women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want". A Sexton Marketing Group Survey of 1200 Australians in 2007 found that 70% said abortion was "bad but *sometimes* justifiable". When asked in what cases was abortion justifiable the only category where the majority of Australians thought abortion was justifiable was in the

case of severe disability. **When asked about the morality of abortion to choose a child's sex only 7% of Australians approved.**

Certainly, the idea that someone would terminate a healthy pregnancy is hard for many infertile couples to comprehend. If it is safe to assume a general disapproval of abortion for sex selection then it is interesting that the senators proposal to block public funding for it might in itself be critiqued harshly. A public against the notion of abortion for sex selection would not likely want public funding used for something they disagree with.

If the principles behind sex selection goes against the beliefs of many Australians then so too may IVF sex selection. It raises interesting questions over the ethical standards and principles we subscribe to as a nation. The National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines say sex selection should not be done in Australian IVF clinics except to reduce the transmission of a serious genetic condition. "The prohibition of eugenic practices, in particular those aiming at selection of persons" is part of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Whilst Australia restricts gender selection in IVF, sperm banks make the traits of the donor available allowing for such traits as hair colour to be chosen in a donor. The world's largest sperm bank, Cyros International, has had to turn away sperm donations from red heads due to a lack of demand. The IVF clinic in California who stopped the practice of gender selection still actively promotes the genetic screening for health concerns including colour blindness. It makes you wonder how the readers with red hair and colour blindness might feel right about now.

The response to the proposed bill has been based on women's rights. A possible affiliated message conveyed by blanket disapproval of the proposed bill is one that it is ok to intervene in reproduction based on non-serious genetic markers. In the early 20th century many "interventions" were used to discriminate against types of people and in the extreme to kill. Lets hope that in an effort to protect women's rights we don't swing the pendulum towards the undesirable eugenic principles that led to such atrocities.

All human beings are the "subject" of rights not the "object" of rights.

Parents do not have the right to choose what child they get, or terminate pregnancy based on desires for a "type" of person. If this becomes a widespread practice parents will become more like owners of children not caregivers. On the issue of gender selection, our focus can be shifted ever so slightly from the rights of a child, to upholding the wishes of a parent. In doing that the rights and the welfare of children get relegated to second place.

Society expresses respect for the dignity of each person, by recognising him or her as a person and not as an object. **When parliamentarians get social policy wrong we see long lasting issues and pain inflicted for generations. We saw this with the stolen generation and forced adoptions. Lets hope that we get this issue right the first time around.**

* Fleming, J, and Tonti-Filippini, N. *Common Ground?: Seeking an Australian Consensus on Abortion and Sex Education*. (Strathfield: St Pauls 2007)