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Maximum consultation in the use of frozen embryo

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THE media recently highlighted achievements in treating infertility, including the use of frozen embryos.

Apart from a cursory and loose allusion to possible legal implications concerning its rights and "ownership", none of the other dailies to my knowledge stressed or alluded to the long-term moral or legal implications.

Ironically, during the past few years, there have been numerous assertions by the political leaders of Malaysia for a need to produce a civil society imbued with moral values and co-operation.

In fact, this point was emphasised yet again by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his speech at the 50th anniversary dinner of the Council of Churches of Malaysia held recently.

According to the president of the council: "The Barisan Nasional Government, under the wise leadership of our Prime Minister, has never backtracked from the national mandate that Malaysia shall be built and governed on the principles of tolerance and mutual respect through maximum consultation." (emphasis mine).

The ethical problems posed by frozen embryos are indeed both multifaceted and exceptionally delicate.

The recent destruction of human embryos in Britain raised a furore in Europe and other parts of the world where its existence carried implications deemed significant.

In the West, the sensitive cultures invariably possess the ancient Christian and Catholic living tradition regarding the sanctity of life, gained initially from their experience in disciplined community living while existing in a hostile and pagan world which held many contradictory values.

Up to this point in time, the greatly enlarged citizens and administrators of the Roman Catholic Church view the destruction of a viable embryo as both a type of abortion and murder, since (according to the standards of discipline and discrimination of this particular body) life begins at conception.

In a society deeply committed to ethics and equity, much public debate and consensus would be sought, i.e. "maximum consultation" would be practised.

According to the Malay Mail, the fertility centre here stores embryos for two years.

There was no mention of its fate after this period.

Without appropriate measures and safeguards, there is a possibility that some of the embryos would be destroyed, for various reasons, such as death of parents, divorce and dispossession if offspring is not desired.

The legal and moral implications of such acts are not trivial.

If indiscriminately allowed without very careful analysis, this would lead to modification in the interpretation of law concerning the definition of human life and personality.

In particular, there would be severe modifications in interpretation of what remains of the amended laws regulating abortion in this country - as well as modification to the moral values and traditions so carefully preserved in some non-opportunistic and ancient religions possibly practised in Malaysia.

If "maximum consultation" had been practised in a morally and legally

sensitive environment, then perhaps modified procedures (even though considered somewhat unorthodox by the so-called advanced countries from which, through the inevitable and inexorable process of easy percolation, the techniques perfected are repeated here) would be recommended here, and experimented upon until they become a practicable proposition.

For instance, even though initially a little tedious (because no ready-made external technology or example exists for near-instant replication) why cannot frozen eggs extracted from a donor be fertilised just before implantations?

Such a procedure would at least not allow for storage of frozen embryos.

Such an ethical imperative would require locals to pioneer techniques on their own without readily available copy-cat recipes and the rewards that go with such practices.

When the ethical imperative is lacking, the usual procedure is to use economic justifications in adopting an alien technique with its values.

If there exists various ethical imperatives in this country that stress on the long-term protection of the embryo, then such provisions must be provided before the services are rendered.

This must be based on "maximum consultation" regarding the general population's own perception of life, and the legal provisions concerning life at the early stages, rather than to manipulate the population to get used to a new convenient prescription based on convenient global and turnkey bureaucratic set-ups.

In cultures which for various reasons do not possess a strong moral conscience and long-term intellectual tradition, the dictates from the marketplace and the prevalent political order serve as the main foundations in creating an opportunistic, short-term, apparently adaptable and relativistic moral code.