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The ethics of stem-cell research

MEDICAL science has progressed such that on the eve of Malaysia's first international biotechnology conference the Prime Minister felt compelled to pledge that local scientists would not be allowed to "play God" in the contentious field of stem-cell research.

It is contentious because it carries with it the potential of human cloning if left unfettered. Here is an area with pitfalls galore. For, far too many negative human attributes can be easily seduced into appropriating what ought to remain a divine prerogative.

Hence, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's clear stand on the country's agenda: Malaysia will exploit the biotechnology that promises medical science a quantum leap in the treatment of fatal diseases, especially those requiring organ transplants, while religiously avoiding the folly of human arrogance. Such a noble objective requires concrete guidelines that would unequivocally set out the permissible parameters, clear of ambiguities and full of threat to the errant.

However, before any inviolable ethical code of practice can be hatched, those who will do the job must be truly knowledgeable about stem-cell technology itself and all its attendant consequences, both good and bad - an imperative made evident given the rampant prejudices already extant. Only then can those sitting in judgment over humanity's future distinguish the trees from the forest. That the public must know is also equally imperative.

But, to not take up the challenge of developing it domestically is to guarantee total future medical dependence on others. Bioethics is the product of vanguard science getting ahead of itself. As valid as its concerns are, it should not transgress into the realm of science fiction.

Most importantly, however, why should humanity be so uncertain of a life-saving technology when it embraces with few questions the huge sums spent on amassing weapons of mass destruction that are becoming increasingly more sophisticated by the day?