

## **500,000 FROZEN EMBRYOS CRY OUT TO BE BORN**

by Nick Gier

When octuplets mother Nadya Suleman was asked on NBC's *Today* show why, in each of her six pregnancies, she had all her embryos transferred to her womb, she answered emphatically: "They are my children!"

In a heated argument on RadarOnline.com, Suleman's mother reminded her daughter that she could have kept some of her embryos in the freezer. Suleman shot back that her embryos "were lives . . . you either use them or destroy them." For her discarding them was definitely not an option.

Let us ponder the full implications of Suleman's extreme pro-life position. There are an estimated 500,000 frozen embryos in America's fertility clinics. They are left over from all the attempts at "in vitro fertilization" (IVF).

In many cases people have stopped paying storage fees for these "souls on ice," as Liza Mundy calls them in her book *Everything Conceivable*. During the Bush administration, few people dared to destroy their embryos for fear of prosecution, or at least an executive order holding them in limbo.

In this case, "Limbo of the Infants" is exactly the right place if you follow Catholic doctrine, although recently some of their theologians have proposed that unbaptized fetuses/infants ascend directly to heaven. Reading the obituaries these days it seems as if everyone is going there anyway.

Unlike Suleman, most people obviously have not implanted all their embryos; rather, they evidently have chosen to follow guidelines of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM).

For women under 35 (Suleman is 33), ASRM recommends that only one embryo be transferred; for those between 35-37, ASRM sets two as a limit; for those between 38-40, just three; and for those over 40, five embryos are allowed, presumably because of increased difficulties of implantation and survival.

The number of embryo transfers per woman reported to Atlanta's Center for Disease Control and Prevention has actually gone down, but, unlike European health systems, following the guidelines and the reporting to Atlanta are voluntary. Obviously Suleman's doctor, tax cheat Michael Kamrava of Beverly Hills, allowed her to "shoot the IVF moon" in all six pregnancies.

There are many more health risks with IVF, starting with increased mortality for both mothers and fetuses. Illinois Right to Life, drawing on research published in the *New England Medical Journal*, warns "that babies conceived by IVF have a 1 in 10 risk of birth defects, twice the risk of babies born naturally. The defects included holes in their hearts, one kidney instead of two, brain abnormalities, and cleft lips and palettes."

Suleman says that her doctor informed her about the risks, but according to her logic, people who leave their embryos on ice are guilty of child abuse and should be reported to authorities. They are someone's children, and they should be transferred to wombs post haste. Ironically, there are now rumors that Suleman's babies will not be released to her, because hospital officials believe that she may not be able to properly care for them.

Not only are many embryos discarded after clients are satisfied with the results, but some of them are "selectively reduced" while in the womb. IVF embryos are much more likely to twin. Suleman's fifth pregnancy produced twins and there are two sets of twins among the octuplets. In her research for her book Mundy found that reduction of twins to a singleton is actually quite common.

During the "reduction" process clients are often asked to choose according to gender. Doctors want to say that "selective reduction" is not abortion, but Suleman and pro-lifers would cry "murder, murder, murder!"

Although Suleman says that she expects her church to help her, she has, in all the interviews I've watched, not once mentioned God. Appearing with Ophra Winfrey Suleman's father did say that it was God's will that all this happened.

It is significant to note that the word "embryo" does appear in one translation of Psalms 139:16: "Your eyes saw my embryo; and in Your book my members were written."

In most translations of Psalms 139, the Hebrew word *golem* is rendered as "unformed substance." In the Jewish tradition a *golem* has no soul, and until 1917, the Catholic Church allowed abortions of "unformed" fetuses, those in the first trimester of pregnancy.

Chuck Colson, the prison evangelist of Watergate fame, agrees with many Christians who believe that IVF "represents a rejection of the natural order and the God who instituted that order" (*The Christian Post* 2/20/09).

But Suleman's father has Martin Luther on his side, because the great reformer declared that "since God does all, we must take it that he acts even in Satan and the godless." The absolute sovereignty of God is a fundamental doctrine for conservative Christians. God wills that everything happens as it does, sometimes for very mysterious reasons.

In Colson's theology God creates an average of 1,000 eggs per female and over 200 million sperm in each ejaculate. Does God really intend that all of these eggs be fertilized and be brought into the world as babies?

I foolishly thought that I could get everyone to agree that this is absurd until I remembered that some very powerful bachelors in the Vatican oppose contraception, because they really believe that this is God's intention.

Biologists estimate that as many as 50 percent of all embryos fail to implant or don't survive implantation. If Luther's God wills all these things, then 500,000 embryos on ice appear to fit in quite nicely with Colson's divine "order."

Many fertility clinic clients want to donate their embryos to scientific research. As we move into the Obama era, let's hope that these people, whatever their choices, make them without fear or intimidation.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read his column "A Frozen Embryo Responds to Its Subpoena" at [www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/embryo.htm](http://www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/embryo.htm). His article on abortion can be found at [www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/abortion.htm](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/abortion.htm).