

MY SAY: Keeping pace with bioethics

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Looks like the brave new world has finally arrived. The website BeautifulPeople.com reportedly "booted out 5,000 people who gained weight and were deemed too ugly to remain members". The site, with the tagline "Where beautiful relationships begin", was founded in Denmark in the early 2000s. It was a departure from the notion that "even ugly people" are allowed to subscribe, and to browse for attractive sperm and egg donors.

The network is the world's largest community of beautiful people, where applicants can upload a profile and have to be "voted in by existing members of the opposite sex". Some 600,000 so-called peers will decide democratically if you are beautiful enough to be a member of the network. Spread over 190 countries, the site boasts that it represents every ethnicity in the world.

On becoming a member, one can donate sperm or eggs if one wishes to add to the attractive gene pool that would benefit others, including the less beautiful ones. The site can offer looks that range from Brad Pitt to Angelina Jolie for newborn babies. Though this is not yet the realm of designer babies, it is certainly heading in that direction.

Of late, the site made headlines when it offered a fertility forum aimed at creating "beautiful babies". The move is likened to "any charity work" by the managing director as "a noble cause for those going through the difficult experience of failing to conceive". Except that experts are unsure what this has to do with creating beautiful babies per se. After all, there is no guarantee that this will happen.

One fertility expert with the University of Southern California was quoted as saying that such an important decision "on the basis of information posted on a website would be naive at best".

Perhaps this is where the 10th World Congress of Bioethics held in Singapore late last month is timely as an academic and scholarly forum to discuss the bio-related issues of the day. This extends from synthetic biology to organ transplant and other current topics. Some topics were put forward by the World Health Organization (WHO), such as human cell, tissue and organ transplant, that were adopted at WHO's World Health Assembly in May last year. Another is about the control of tuberculosis, especially with respect to travel with airborne bacterial diseases.

The procedures and standards for research ethics worldwide, which are aimed at stopping the practice of "rogue" science and impending businesses, were also discussed. An example is the use of new technologies like synthetic biology that allows the engineering of biological systems that are not found in nature, and thus are not as yet well understood. Should something go wrong, or result in conflicts of interest, the consequences could be grave.

Already, international collaborations are being forged specially to sidestep some of the ethical issues in one country. More recently, it was found that guidelines were being drawn up by scientists who had ties with drug companies that tended to benefit from such associations. While this is not a new issue, it has not been seriously addressed even as recently as the H1N1 global pandemic, involving WHO no less.

In other words, as the domain of biosciences expands, so too do issues relating to bioethics. Keeping pace with such development is not easy, with many more complex issues rearing their ugly heads. It's even worse if religious sensitivities are touched across the board. We have not even begun to delve into the biobusiness aspects that one would expect to pick up from the brisk development of biosciences.

One suggestion is to set up special courts just to deal with bioethical issues so that emerging dilemmas can be quickly resolved and precedents established. But there is still no guarantee when it comes to morality, complicated by a growing number of issues extending beyond national boundaries. What is more, many countries are ill-prepared for such endeavours and have become a hot-bed of unethical practices.

In other words, while we actively promote bio-technological research and innovations, leading to the mushrooming of bio-based business, it is imperative that we too take an active interest in preventing unethical misadventures just because one is blinded by the work and the drive for achievement, as in the case of Dr Hwang Woo-suk of South Korea in 2005 when he lied about successfully creating human embryonic stem cells by cloning.

After all, the first principle established by the UNESCO Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005) is respect for human dignity and human rights, emphasising the priority of the interests and welfare of the individual over the sole interest of science or society. And certainly businesses.

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