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IVF opened 'wrong door' to treat infertility: Vatican official

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service



Robert Edwards, named winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine Oct. 4 for the development of in vitro fertilization, is pictured in a 2003 photo with Louise Brown, the world's first "test-tube baby."
(CNS/Reuters)

[Editor's Note: This updates and expands on a story posted Oct. 4, 2010.]

VATICAN CITY -- While honoring one of the inventors of in vitro fertilization with the Nobel Prize for Medicine recognizes his contribution to human reproduction, it ignores the ethical consequences of his opening "the wrong door" in the fight against infertility, said the president of the Pontifical Academy for Life.

British scientist Robert Edwards, a retired professor at the University of Cambridge, England, was named the Nobel winner Oct. 4 for the development of in vitro fertilization.

His work led to the birth in 1978 of Louise Brown, the world's first "test-tube baby."

In a press release, the award committee said: "Approximately 4 million individuals have so far been born following IVF. Many of them are now adult and some have already become parents. A new field of medicine has emerged, with Robert Edwards leading the process all the way from the fundamental discoveries to the current, successful IVF therapy. His contributions represent a milestone in the development of modern medicine."

Msgr. Ignacio Carrasco de Paula, head of the Pontifical Academy for Life, said he recognized that Edwards "ushered in a new and important chapter in the field of human reproduction in which the best results are visible to everyone, beginning with Louise Brown."

However, "without Edwards there wouldn't be a market for oocytes (immature egg cells), without Edwards there wouldn't be freezers full of embryos waiting to be transferred in utero or, more likely, to be used for research or to die abandoned and forgotten by everyone," the monsignor said in a written statement released by the Vatican press office Oct. 4.

The written statement came after Msgr. Carrasco spoke with the Italian news agency, ANSA, and said the Nobel committee's selection of Edwards was "completely out of place."

The extraction and trade of human eggs and the number of frozen embryos that end up being abandoned or left to die all represent "a problem for which the newly awarded Nobel winner is responsible," the monsignor told ANSA.

A few hours after the ANSA interview appeared, the Vatican issued a statement saying his comments, which were made in response to journalists' questions, represented Msgr. Carrasco's personal opinion and did not represent the pontifical academy.

In the statement released later by the Vatican, Msgr. Carrasco said while Edwards presented a whole new approach to the problem of infertility, "he opened the wrong door from the moment in which he focused everything on in vitro fertilization," which also meant he implicitly permitted people to turn to donations and a buyers-and-sellers market "that involves human beings."

By focusing so much research and action on the in vitro method, Edwards did not confront the pathological causes or epidemiological aspects of infertility, he said.

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A more ethical and effective solution to the "serious problem" of infertility is waiting in the wings with methods that are also less expensive, he said.

The Vatican-based International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations also expressed its dismay about the Nobel committee's announcement.

"Although IVF has brought happiness to the many couples who have conceived through this process, it has done so at an enormous cost. That cost is the undermining of the dignity of the human person," said the federation's president, Jose Simon Castellvi.

The IVF process has created and discarded millions of embryos that have been treated and used "as experimental animals destined for destruction," he said in a written declaration Oct. 5.

"This use has led to a culture where (embryos) are regarded as commodities, rather than the precious

human individuals which they are," he wrote.

"As Catholic doctors we recognize the pain that infertility brings to a couple, but equally we believe that the research and treatment methods needed to solve the problems of infertility have to be conducted within an ethical framework which respects the special dignity of the human embryo, which is no different from that of a mature adult with a brilliant mind," he wrote.

Meanwhile, Lucio Romano, president of the Italian association Science and Life, told Vatican Radio Oct. 4 that Edwards did make a huge mark on modern science because he took techniques used for breeding livestock and applied them to human beings.

But "this absolutely does not represent progress for the human person," said Romano, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Frederick II University in Naples, Italy.

Awarding the Nobel to Edwards, he said, ignores all the ethical problems connected with IVF, in which human eggs are removed from a woman and fertilized in a laboratory. The fertilized eggs are implanted in a woman's uterus with the hope the pregnancy will progress normally from that point. Usually, multiple eggs are fertilized at once with only a select few being implanted.

A 2008 document on bioethics issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith repeated earlier Vatican condemnations of in vitro fertilization because it separates procreation from the conjugal act in marriage, and because in practice unused embryos are often discarded, thus violating the principle that "the human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception."

[Contributing to this story was Cindy Wooden at the Vatican.]

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