

Sign of the Times? Government Moves Forge Human and Animal Embryos

The National Institute of Health moved to lift a ban preventing scientists from experimenting with half-human, half-animal embryos.

“With recent advances in stem cell and gene editing technologies, an increasing number of researchers are interested in growing human tissues and organs in animals by introducing pluripotent human cells into early animal embryos,” NIH’s Associate Director for Science Policy Carrie D. Wolinetz writes in a blog post.

“Formation of these types of human-animal organism, referred to as ‘chimeras,’ holds tremendous potential for disease modeling, drug testing, and perhaps eventual organ transplant. However, uncertainty about the effects of human cells on off-target organs and tissues in the chimeric animals, particularly in the nervous system, raises ethical and animal welfare concerns,” she writes.

Professor of cell biology and anatomy at the New York Medical College Stuart Newman calls the experiments “unsettling.”

“You’re getting into unsettling ground that I think is damaging to our sense of humanity,” Newman tells NPR.

NPR reports others are apprehensive about the experiments, as well.

Françoise Baylis, a bioethicist at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, Canada, says the engineering of creatures that are partly human and partly nonhuman animal is objectionable because the existence of such beings “would introduce

inexorable moral confusion in our existing relationships with nonhuman animals, and in our future relationships with part-human hybrids and chimeras."

Another concern is that the human cells could end up in the brains of the animals. That raises the prospect that "this will somehow give the animal a human consciousness, human mental capabilities," says Hank Greely, a bioethicist at Stanford University.

In addition, some scientists and bioethicists fear the stem cells could create human eggs and sperm in the animals.

"If you had a male mouse that had human sperm in it, that's going to be a concern to some people, especially if it's anywhere near a female mouse that has human eggs in it," Greely says. "To say the least, it's disconcerting to think about two mice making a human embryo."

Biblically, God breathed His image into human flesh alone, and gave man dominion over the animals.

Where do you stand? Sound off in the comments below!