The Embryo: Scientific Discovery and Medical Ethics
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and with love to Tova, Tamar and Yitzhak

Shraga Blazer

In memory of my dear parents Cilli and Dr. Josef Zimmer,
and with love to Lihi, Yoni and Esther

Etan Z. Zimmer
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Preface

In November 2002, a historic scientific conference took place. With the benefit of the ‘retrospectoscope’, the historic nature of this conference is now crystal clear. Today, virtually every issue of the world’s leading scientific, medicolegal and medical ethics periodicals and monographs devote numerous pages to questions in their cognate disciplines dealing with controversial aspects of research pertaining to the embryo and fetus. This explosion of interest is the result of breakthroughs in areas such as fetal ultrasonography, prenatal genetic diagnosis, human embryonic stem cell research, therapeutic cloning and reproductive cloning. The breathtaking pace of progress and development at the scientific level has outstripped the pace of intelligent civil discourse and thoughtful scholarly work in the legal and ethical domains. Therefore, we can be truly amazed by the prescience shown already at the beginning of year 2000 by Drs. Shraga Blazer and Etan Zimmer and their colleagues in conceiving, planning and finally implementing the conference entitled: ‘The Unborn Child: Scientific Discovery, Medical and Ethical Dilemmas’. The current publication represents a complementary monograph which reflects the high quality of scholarly input from the speakers, as well as the audience participants.

Organization of the conference, as reflected in this monograph, represented a masterful orchestration of input from a wide panoply of disciplines. Approximately 17 speakers and 1,000 members of the audience were literally riveted to their seats throughout the 2-day conference, and were deeply engaged in the high level of scholarly dynamic interaction. One would have thought that with such an eclectic mix of topics, speakers and audience, it would be difficult to find common ground for multidisciplinary dialogue. In fact, the opposite occurred. Highly thoughtful individuals from the audience and from among speakers with varying backgrounds and quite different opinions exchanged ideas with the highest level of mutual respect. Theologians representing viewpoints of the Holy See exchanged their views with evolutionary biologists regarding such cosmic questions as ‘the beginning of life’, and ‘the sanctity of life’. Legal authorities and molecular geneticists exchanged views regarding the tension between scientific imperative on the one hand, and social responsibility and genetic privacy on the other hand. Numerous other examples can be cited and are reflected in the
elegantly worded chapters and overall organization of this book. It is clear, that this book will become a ‘standard’, against which all future professional and scholarly literature dealing with this important area, will be measured.

Perhaps the importance of the conference, and the book describing many of the topics covered at the conference, can be best understood by relating one of the most frequently heard comments regarding the conference itself. Despite the difficult security situation which prevailed in the State of Israel at the time of the conference, there were numerous participants from other countries. Among these participants there was the uniform feeling that, given the emotionally and politically charged content of many of the topics, a conference such as this could not have been held in most other constituencies around the world. The title of the conference, and certainly its content, would have drawn protest and bias from interest groups that would likely have disrupted what is most needed, namely ‘civil discourse’. It is perhaps paradoxical that of all places in the world, it is in Israel that a sanctuary was found wherein representatives of the three dominant religions, jurists, ethicists, scientists, politicians, members of the press, health professionals, and the public found a comfortable and secure environment to sit together and conduct a high-level productive discussion pertaining to pressing issues which are becoming a more acute and important part of the public health research agenda throughout the world.

It is our hope that future international conferences on this topic will also yield further progress that will shape and guide human progress in the light of scientific and medical discovery.

Karl L. Skorecki, MD, FRCP