



## Reproductive Choice

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In all of the important decisions that we face in our lives we draw upon our own personal experiences. Thankfully, we cannot see into the future and predict which of the really big decisions fate will force us to consider. On the basis of almost five years of research, investigation, and much angst and frustration, we hope to detail the conclusions that we as parents have arrived at on the issue of gender choice.

### 1. The use of sex selection to prevent the transmission of hereditary diseases

The recent Hashmi and Whittaker cases offer compelling evidence for why we should allow the use of technology to save children from the blight of disability and a lifetime of needless pain and suffering. The concept of intergenerational justice has been applied to reproductive choices. This suggests that we are morally obliged to ensure the wellbeing and health of future generations as far as we have the capacity to do so. We have a moral obligation to eradicate conditions that cause pain and shorten life expectancy.

After years of procrastination, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) eventually granted a licence for the procedure in the Hashmi case. Much valuable time was lost due to bureaucratic red tape. The system of licensing in this country is outdated and needs to change to respond to today's demands. We need to examine what the HFEA does well, such as the licensing of clinics, and retain it, and then cut out what it does poorly, particularly in the way in which it relates to patients and their families.

Parents will do whatever it takes to save a dying child. Those of us unfortunate enough to have lived through this can testify to that. I suspect that those who criticise such procedures are hypocrites – when a clinician advises you that your child is dying you see your moral stance in a completely different light. How can people who claim to be 'pro-life' oppose the use of technology in these cases?

## 2. The use of sex selection for family balancing

We have fought for the right to choose the gender of a child for reasons of so-called family balancing. This is where a family has a number of children of one gender and feels the need for a child of the opposite gender to complement or complete their family.

Eighteen years ago we were blessed and ecstatic at the arrival of our eldest son. We didn't care if he was a boy or a girl; we just wanted a healthy child. We were blessed with a further three sons over the next six years. Our need for a female child felt normal, not a want but a need. In 1994, we decided to try one last time to have our girl and on 5 December 1995 our princess arrived - in a hurry, as would be her way. She was beautiful, perfect and ours. Our family complete, Louise was sterilised in 1996.

On 22 June 1999 Nicole was caught by a lick of flame from a small fire in our garden. We got her into a bath of freezing water almost instantly, but the damage was done in that one fatal moment. Our precious angel lost her fight for life on 22 July 1999 after 61 days and over 100 hours of tortuous skin graft surgery. She was three years and seven months old; we miss her every hour of every day.

The ultimate human right is the right to life, and the right of reproductive choice closely follows this. Therefore, what right has a non-elected quango (the HFEA) to interfere in the reproductive choices of sane, experienced parents? One of the core principles of a free and democratic society is that individuals have complete freedom of choice so long as their actions cause no harm to others. Gender choice affects only the family concerned.

Opponents of such choice refer to 'divine law', 'slippery slopes' and 'floodgates opening', with occasional misleading references made to historical atrocities. However, all such arguments are seriously flawed. We take some comfort from the recent report of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, which concluded that situations such as our own should be considered for treatment and upheld the liberal principle that in the absence of harm there is no sustainable reason to prevent such treatment.

Change should involve carefully balancing responsible medical ethics with freedom of choice about the structure of one's own family. You cannot undo progress: let's stop the nonsense and get the procedures right in this country, for the parents who are demanding gender choice now and for those who will demand it in the future.