

BABY FAE: AN EXPERIMENTAL CHILD

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(1) Experimentation occurs frequently in the lives of most people. Tasting new foods, purchasing various brands of products, and attempting new hobbies all involve a certain degree of experimentation. Yet people pursue these simple "experiments" with the understanding that sufficient knowledge of their outcomes already exists. For example, in tasting new foods or purchasing different products, individuals realize that, whether they find an appetizing or unappetizing flavor, an improved or worsened effect, they are always assured of a somewhat stable outcome. Logical "experiments" such as these are motivated by individuals' desires to seek improvements in or alternatives to their habitual lifestyles.

(2) Recently, a medical experiment with much stronger implications took place at Loma Linda University Medical Center in California. Though the most outstanding difference between the medical experiment and the "experiments" of everyday life is the involvement of a human life, an underlying difference between the two can also be seen in their motives. Unlike the trivial "experiments" of everyday life, this medical experiment lacked the sufficient knowledge that would assure some stable outcome. In light of the serious consequences possible in this medical experiment, it should have been based more firmly on scientific evidence.

(3) Today, medical science is no longer confined to existing knowledge, as it once was ("Tough Issues" 28). In this case, those who support the xenograft performed on Baby Fae contend that with a limited supply of human infant hearts, medical science needed to search for alternatives to heart disease, and therefore was forced to step beyond current knowledge. However, to transplant a baboon's heart into Baby Fae was not merely a precarious experimental step but one that exploited an innocent child.

(4) Because too little information exists about the effects of xenografts, the operation lacked a sufficient grounding in medical science. In four previous attempts to insert an animal heart into a human being, little progress in the technique had been made. The survival of the most successful transplant patient was a mere three and one-half days. By rejecting the animal heart, the immune system of the human body proved its incompatibility with this extraneous organ.

("Experimenting"). Much of the medical community too asserted its opposition, believing "that the science of cross-species transplants hasn't advanced to the point where it should be attempted on humans" ("Tough Issues" 26). Some believe also that Baby Fae's doctors overlooked the stipulations of the Nuremberg Code, which states that appropriate animal research must occur before human studies can ensue (Vaux). Since "almost nothing is known about how organs age when they are transplanted into a different species," the operation clearly violated the Nuremberg Code ("Experimenting"). "If the heart is not rejected and even if it grows as the infant does," the limits the baboon's heart could eventually place on Baby Fae still remain questionable ("Experimenting"). Many problems of the operation were undefined, yet her doctors continued "pushing the frontiers of organ transplantation" with little regard for the child's future ("Tough Issues" 25).

(5) Both Baby Fae's parents and her doctors made questionable decisions regarding the operation. For human experimentation, the Nuremberg Code requires that the subject must consent to the research; otherwise, if the experiment advances others' personal gain, the subject's rights are violated. In this case, because Baby Fae obviously couldn't grant permission to the doctors, the responsibility to act in her best interest was left to her parents and doctors. In consenting to the xenograft, Baby Fae's parents agreed either to a therapeutic attempt to save her life or to an experimental attempt which possibly would save the lives of future babies afflicted with heart problems. If her parents felt the operation would offer her a chance at life, they were deceived, unaware that little evidence supported this view. But, if her parents realized the experimental nature of the operation, they were not acting in Baby Fae's best interest by offering her life to medical science (Krauthammer 87-88).

(6) If Baby Fae's parents consented to the xenograft as a life-saving technique, then her doctors were at fault for providing this deceptive information. To act in the baby's best interest means to explore all possibilities and alternatives to her problem. Transplanting a human heart or attempting corrective surgery are two alternate routes that could have been chosen (Wallis 72). Admitting they weren't interested in these alternatives, Baby Fae's doctors actually used the operation "to carry their seven years of research on interspecies transplants one step further" ("Experimenting").

(7) In carrying out this operation, the medical staff sought their own recognition more than their patient's welfare. Suggesting "that a human heart 'would have offered the child a better chance of survival,'" Dr. Fadali, a cardiovascular surgeon, labelled the use of an

animal heart clearly "a matter of bravado"(Wallis 71). Transplanting an infant heart into Baby Fae would have been possible on the day of her operation, but her doctors were solely interested in research "aimed at animal-to-human transplants" ("Tough Issues" 27). By passing up an opportunity that would have provided the child a stronger possibility of survival, her doctors clearly defined their motive: to advance a specific area of research. Using a human heart in Baby Fae would have left their line of research at a standstill, even though it might have allowed Baby Fae's line of life to continue (Krauthammer 87). The use of the baboon's heart, if successful, would be a remarkable breakthrough, but while it would benefit the children of the future, it would also advance the reputations of the doctors who had accomplished this feat (Krauthammer 88).

(8) Those who sought this fame and others who support xenografts do believe this newfound transplantation technique offers a strong alternative to other means of correcting heart disease. Because appropriate infant hearts are seldom available, using a more accessible animal heart increases the chances for suffering infants. The number of possible heart recipients is expected to rise sharply in the future; those in favor of xenografts believe animal hearts can reduce the overwhelming need for human hearts ("Tough Issues" 27). Baboon hearts can reduce the potential number of human hearts needed for transplants, and cyclosporine, a recently developed drug, can reduce the potential problem of organ rejection by the human body. Suppressing the immune system, cyclosporine inhibits organ rejection and therefore increases the survival rates of heart recipients (Wallis 71). Since the main problem associated with organ transplants is that of organ rejection, this drug offers the final piece of evidence in the argument of xenograft supporters.

(9) However, although xenograft supporters believe this type of transplant offers an alternate route to heart patients, it actually involves more risks than benefits. Without concrete evidence about cross-species transplants the possible effects of xenografts are obscure at best.

(10) The long-term effects of cyclosporine, too, are unknown, and already it "has been found to cause liver and kidney damage and to increase the risk of certain cancers" (Wallis 72). Now, in light of additional information about cyclosporine, it no longer seems to be the "wonder-drug" so eagerly described by Baby Fae's doctors (Wallis 71). Though it may offer immediate suppression of the body's immune system, none of its additional effects can be explicitly defined.

(11) Lacking sufficient knowledge and obtaining questionable consent, Baby Fae's doctors ventured into a

dangerously underdeveloped area of medical science. Questioning the intentions of Baby Fae's doctors, George Annas, a professor of health law, asks, "What is going on here? Are we getting back to the old days when doctors just experimented [on people]?" ("Tough issues" 26). Denying this accusation would be difficult for Loma Linda officials, since they admit hoping that there "will be five baboon-to-Infant heart transfers" succeeding Baby Fae's transplant ("Tough issues" 27). The capricious experimentation performed by Baby Fae's doctors led not only to the death of an innocent child, but to even stronger skepticism regarding cross-species transplants.

List of Sources

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