

## If It Looks Like a Clone and Acts Like a Clone, Is It Not a Clone?

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A war of words has begun in the aftermath of the announcement by the Massachusetts biotechnology company, Advanced Cell Technology (ACT), that it had successfully cloned a human embryo. In hearings in the U.S. Senate, proponents of allowing the creation of cloned embryos for research and therapeutic purposes, but not for reproduction, were trying to distance the practice from the term “cloning” altogether, trying to distinguish their technique from what has become the most contentious social issue since abortion. Ever since Dolly the sheep was successfully cloned, commentators, politicians, and the public have grappled with what it would mean to clone a human being, and what to do about advancing technology that seems to make it possible.

By calling the process “nuclear transplantation” or “therapeutic cellular transfer,” and the result an “activated egg” or “ovasome,” to name a few terms used at the hearings, various experts in science and ethics, along with some politicians, were trying to separate the technique from the future Brave New World conjured by the term *cloning*, and even avoided the term *embryo*. But do such verbal gymnastics help or hinder public discussion and policy making, and what can we learn from the language used in past debates about other controversial social policies?

### *Clarifying or Confusing?*

One example to draw from is the experience with so-called “brain death.” More correctly called “death by

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brain criteria,” the concept of brain death was established in the late 1960s to allow patients to be declared dead when the most basic brain function ceases, even though their hearts continued to beat and they continued to breathe, albeit with assistance. This was an important step in preventing patients from being kept alive indefinitely on ventilators, and allowed the use of organs from patients declared brain dead to be used in transplantation. But by creating a “new” category of death and a term to go along with it, even more than 30 years later, families are often confused about whether their loved one is truly dead or merely brain dead. What is important for families is not the technical terms that apply, but the meaning of them—are their loved ones dead or not?

### *Focus on Issues Not Words*

In the case of cloned human embryos, the terms we use are important as rhetoric, but they distract us from the real meaning of the technique and its implications. The purpose of ACT’s experiments was to create a source of embryonic stem cells with genetic makeup identical to a person whose DNA was used to make them. The technique used was exactly the same as was used in creating Dolly the sheep, which has not been called anything but cloning, and it was part of the successful effort to create an embryo.

So if the technique used by ACT creates an organism that has the same properties as human embryos and if it can be used in research that involve human embryos, and if the organism implanted in a woman’s uterus would develop like a human embryo, then shouldn’t we think about whether to use it like we use human embryos? To call it something different distracts us from the real issues at hand: Should we use human embryos for research and therapies, and if so, is it acceptable to make, and clone them? To answer these questions, we need to recognize that words matter. But even more important is clear discussion and debate. We need fewer arguments about what to call cloned embryos, and more about whether to make them—unless what we really care about is discussing how many human embryos can fit on the head of a pin.