

Correspondence

Acts and omissions doctrine and abortion

SIR

Murphy suggests in the June issue of the journal (1) that the anti-abortionist, by virtue of that moral position, is logically obliged to try and prevent spontaneous abortions, even those presently undetected, and find treatment for them. The issue of spontaneous abortion is important, but his discussion of the possible answers to his view omits surely the most obvious one; the 'acts and omissions doctrine'. Many ethicists (particularly among those in the Catholic position who oppose abortion) would draw a distinction between killing, which is how they perceive induced abortion, and letting die which is what occurs in spontaneous abortion. Given that a distinction between these two categories is morally relevant, two levels of obligation can logically be assumed. There seems no logical reason why one should not decide to refrain from active abortion, with all its practical moral sequelae in terms of care of unwanted infants etc; but not actively strive to

prevent spontaneous abortion. There are limited resources for saving life (by medical research and/or clinical activity) and one may choose, on consequentialist or other grounds not related to the personhood of the fetus, to direct those energies elsewhere. True, the logic of the acts/omissions doctrine can be challenged, as Rachels (2) and Glover (3) have done.

However, unless Murphy can successfully mount such a challenge he cannot place the burden of his conclusion on the shoulders of the strong anti-abortionists.

References

- (1) Murphy T F. The moral significance of spontaneous abortion. *Journal of medical ethics* 1985; 11: 79-83.
- (2) Rachels J. Active and passive euthanasia. *New England journal of medicine* 1975, Jan.
- (3) Glover J. *Saving life and causing death*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

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Sperm and ova as property

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I noted with interest Robert P S Jansen's view in the September issue of the journal (1) that marriage is a form of genetic matching. As such he supports the posthumous artificial insemination of husbands' sperm, stored in a sperm bank, in order to optimise women's 'quest for children'.

Do I understand then, in these days of equality, that he would advocate that men should utilise surrogate mothers together with the technique of embryo transfer to satisfy their quest for genetically matched children - or does that instinct remain the sole province of the weaker sex?

References

- (1) Jansen R P S. Sperm and ova as property. *Journal of medical ethics* 1985; 11: 123-126.

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