

provides some empirical support for the belief that junior doctors should be cared for not only for their own sakes but also for that of their patients. I hope that this kind of evidence will speed up the day when junior doctors are valued and supported as they should be.

DR TONY HOPE,
*Oxford Practice Skills Project,
Medical School Offices,
John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford.*

Who am I? Identity, Adoption and Human Fertilisation

Christine Walby and Barbara Symons, 127 pages, London, £9.95, British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, 1990

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 was fully implemented by the end of last year. The contention of this book is that the code of practice governing the Statutory Licensing Authority, and the regulations made by the Secretary of State, should be informed by knowledge gained from the closest parallel in human relationships – the adoption of children by substitute parents, involving the severance of legal ties with members of the biological family.

This booklet charts the historical development of adoption in our society, including the change of emphasis from adoption being regarded as largely a solution to the problems of adults to an emphasis on the importance of decisions being based on the best interests of the child. It also describes the process, the rationale and the dilemmas which have resulted in the shift in adoption philosophy and practice from confidentiality and secrecy being paramount towards carefully controlled access to information and increasing openness. It is heartening that this development stems from research and feedback from participants in adoption, not from abstract principles and unfounded assumptions. The issues which emerge are all highly relevant to the current debate about the ethics of human fertilisation by donor, and surrogacy for commissioning parents.

The authors demonstrate that the conflict between a 'laissez faire' attitude, and agencies taking some responsibility for decisions regarding

fitness for parenthood, is of crucial significance. Reliable findings highlight the importance of a recognition of the difference between biological and other forms of parenthood. The denial of reality has been found to have an unfavourable impact on relationships within the family. The authors furnish sound arguments for formal selection procedures, which explicitly acknowledge the responsibilities to children, and the adults they will become, inherent in direct social or medical intervention to create families, and which signify an official refusal to collude with pretence. It may be inimical to the medical profession to make judgements regarding eligibility for 'treatment', but there is ample evidence that preparation for parenthood, especially when it involves the extra dimension associated with adoption or human fertilisation, confers lasting benefits. Although this should be seen primarily as an educative process, rather than a series of hurdles, adults who were adopted as children are clear that an assessment procedure should attempt to ascertain the state of mental and physical health of prospective parents, as well as the quality of the marriage or partnership, if one exists. Damaged individuals, or couples, are unlikely to be able to cope with the extra vulnerability inherent in the highly complex set of relationships established by adoption or donor fertilisation.

The authors also discuss the implications of 'genealogical bewilderment', a condition described by thousands of adopted people worldwide, whose formation of a sense of identity has been hampered by lack of information about their heredity. The establishment of a clear, integrated understanding of one's identity is a prerequisite for the development of healthy emotional and social maturity. This secure concept of self, based on acceptance and trust, can only be built on a foundation of honesty and knowledge. Living a lie will take its toll on parents and child alike. This places an obligation on practitioners to furnish parents with adequate, written information about a child's biological background, and to attempt to ascertain willingness and ability to communicate to the child about his or her origins.

Research indicates, however, that a requirement to explain the truth is not the same as making this possible or sufficient. The amount and accuracy of information, and an atmosphere of open communication, whereby the meaning and implications of having two sets of

parents are reiterated and explored at appropriate stages, are critical. Research in the field of adoption has revealed that parents cannot be adequately prepared for the inherently painful and on-going task of explaining in advance. Help, in the form of skilled and experienced counselling, should be available, as an entitlement, subsequently. This raises the crucial question of continuing services for families which have been created as a result of sperm or embryo donation.

This lively, informative and lucid book provides convincing arguments for making a close comparison between the field of adoption and people conceived through human fertilisation techniques. It would be unethical to ignore the lessons gained from adoption about the need to balance the rights and needs of all the parties involved in those delicate transactions which involve transferring children from one set of parents to another.

DIANA REICH,
*Post Adoption Centre,
8 Torriano Mews, Torriano Avenue,
London NW5 2RZ*

The Human Embryo: Aristotle and the Arabic and European Traditions

Edited by G R Dunstan, 246 pages, Exeter, £25.00, University of Exeter Press, 1990

The jacket-illustration of this book depicts St Hildegard's vision of the ensouling of the human embryo. This vision draws on a tradition going back at least to Aristotle, in which the action of the male semen on the female menstrual blood at conception is compared to that of rennet on milk in cheese-making. Delightfully quaint, one might think, but hardly relevant to the questions so urgently raised by the Human Fertilisation and Embryo Act.

This collection of essays is published in the hope that past science is more than a dead letter. It traces some crucial moments in the tradition of enquiry into human reproduction, culminating in an admirably clear article on the embryo in contemporary medical science by Braude and Johnson, which takes care to emphasise points relevant to current ethical and social-policy debates. Ideally the reader interested in ethics will benefit from the other specialist