**Custom-made babies delivered: Fertility clinic doctor's design-a-kid offer creates uproar**

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**Boy or girl? Blond or brunette? Blue eyes or brown? Fertility doc thinks he can deliver.**

A fertility clinic's promise to deliver the ultimate in designer babies - letting parents choose eye, hair and even skin color - is sparking a worldwide uproar.

Dr. Jeff Steinberg has already let thousands decide their kids' gender. Now he says that within the next six months, the Manhattan and L.A. offices of his Fertility Institutes will let would-be moms and dads pick whether junior has blue or brown eyes or black or blond hair.

"In the process of doing gender selection ... we've also uncovered the technology [to] characterize things like eye and hair color," said Steinberg, 54.

The idea of a Build-A-Bear style baby was slammed Monday by bioethicists and right-to-life groups - and Pope Benedict has warned against it for years.

The Pope railed against the "obsessive search for the perfect child" just two weekends ago. "A new mentality is creeping in that tends to justify a different consideration of life and personal dignity," he said.

Steinberg countered that reproductive technologies aren't about to go away.

"Genetic health is the wave of the future," he said. "It's already happening and it's not going to go away. It's going to expand. So if they've got major problems with it, they need to sit down and really examine their own consciences because there's nothing that's going to stop it."

Custom-made kids will be achieved through preimplantation genetic diagnosis, or PGD, the procedure used to weed out problem embryos and to allow parents to choose a gender.

In letting parents decide what traits their kids have, doctors will examine the genetic makeup of embryos created in the lab and implant the ones that have the best chance of giving mom and dad what they want.

Some doctors question Steinberg's ability to give parents their pick of traits.

"He's the only one offering this because you can't yet do it," said Sean Tipton of the American Society for Reproductive Technology. "Nobody can do this right now."

Dr. William Kearns, head of the Shady Grove Center for Preimplantation Genetics in Rockville, Md., says some known genetic markers do correlate with a probability of hair, eye and skin color, but he’s against using the data for non-medical reasons.

"Our goal in offering (embryo screening) to couples at risk is to increase the likelihood that they can achieve their dream of having a healthy baby, free from a catastrophic genetic disease," he said. "I won't use the data for non-medical trait selection."

Steinberg, one of the doctors who helped produce the first test-tube baby, admits the technology isn't 100% - and says for now the best results are with couples of Scandinavian heritage, whose gene pools are the least diluted.

"Say you made seven embryos, and one of them has got the highest chance of green eyes, and that chance is 80%. It's not perfect science because eye and hair color are not perfect genetics," said Steinberg, who opened an office on E. 40th St. two months ago.

There are no laws in New York that address how PGD testing can be used. Opponents say there should be.

Lori Kehoe, executive director of the New York State Right to Life Committee, is upset that the embryos deemed undesirable will be destroyed.

She said it is "sickening to flush a member of the human family down the drain" because they are not considered perfect.

Prof. Alexander Capron, bioethicist and professor of law and medicine at the University of Southern California, called Steinberg's procedure problematic. "The notion of unconditional love and support - which is assumed to be what parents owe their children - is totally undermined here," he said.

"You're saying I want to order up just what I want and that's what I'll love."

One New York doctor even likened it to the pursuit of a master race.

"We're crossing the line into eugenics, the theory of trying to give people enhanced characteristics - genetic engineering to make sort of the superman or superwoman," said Dr. Daniel Sulmasy, director of ethics at New York Medical College and St. Vincent's Hospital.

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