

Wednesday, January 16. 2008

Is it safe? Eating cloned and living cloned.

How-to-clone chart, compliments of NIH's National Human Genome Research Institute. When will the human how-to-clone chart be issued? The United States Food and Drug Administration this week cleared cloned beef, milk, chickens, eggs, bacon, gelatine (you get the picture) as safe for human consumption. Although the current expense of cloning is too high to sell animal meat from cloned animals in the supermarket (cloning apparently costs in the neighborhood of \$16,000 for the first cloned lamb and \$10,000 for those cloned in the same session), that does not negate the cloning of animals destined to breed super-animals for perfectly tender steak, oceans of delicious milk, and mountains of gourmet eggs with the yolks bakers prize. If the eating of cloned animal products is safe -- and the jury should still be out on that -- what is it like to live cloned? Do brain defects, physical defects, disease and other sickness attend being cloned? Unless such risks can be ruled out, why allow cloning, including when it comes to cloning humans? The current literature seems conclusive that cloning cows is simple enough, so cloning humans would appear to be just as simple, at least when removing any moral or ethical hesitations, which should be substantial hesitations. How would a human feel about being a clone or the descendant of a cloned human? What about if the human had dozens of identical clones from various age ranges and generations (hello, Boys from Brazil, or, in the FDA's scenario, bulls and hamburgers from Brazil). If humans are cloned, will that create a new type of discrimination -- anti-clone discrimination? Will people hesitate to date cloned humans and their descendants and to procreate with them? Decades from now, how will it feel for lawyers to walk into court and say "good morning, your honor" to a cloned judge. Where do I stand on all this as a lawyer? My concerns are both about the health of the cloned animal (and those producing the clones) and the health of those eating the clones and their offspring, including ethical and moral concerns. I am a vegan, so my eating will not be affected much by this, except when some cloned butter is slipped into the restaurant vegetables that are represented as sauteed in olive oil. On the other hand, most people are neither vegan nor vegetarian, and will be directly affected by animal cloning. The whole concept of having cloned humans and non-human animals is very chilling to me. For the sake of the welfare of would-be cloned animals and their descendants, to begin with, I am inclined to oppose permitting cloning. However, it is not as easy as that for me, because I am not one automatically to embrace new government bans, because the existence and enforcement of those bans can include draconian actions and results -- including criminal enforcement -- that sometimes or often times are worse than the problem they seek to prevent in the first place. In any event, as with bovine growth hormone/rGBH, no scientific test will be able to distinguish cloned animals and their milk and meat from the non-cloned versions. Eerie, indeed, to say the least. Maybe this will make vegetarianism a more popular option; maybe. Jon Katz. ADDENDUM I: After writing this entry, I read this basic fact sheet from the NIH's National Human Genome Research Institute. It raises questions about the possibility of successfully cloning primates (which category includes humans). This makes it all the more scary to consider that people are out there who are willing to try to clone humans, and the results may be more freakish and ghoulish than imaginable. It is not clear whether the fact sheet's following statement is outdated: "Reproductive cloning is a very inefficient technique and most cloned animal embryos cannot develop into healthy individuals. For instance, Dolly was the only clone to be born live out of a total of 277 cloned embryos. This very low efficiency, combined with safety concerns, presents a serious obstacle to the application of reproductive cloning." (Emphasis added.) ADDENDUM II: Following are information and commentary relating to this entry: - The FDA's full pdf report (released this week) greenlighting the safety of clone-eating. Here is the non-pdf version. - Here is CNN's coverage of the FDA report. - Such corporations as Monsanto patent genetic engineering of food (already in the food supply -- yuck at the very least), and likely will seek to patent approaches to animal cloning. Thanks to Zelig Golden for writing on this. - The FDA generally cleared milk and meat cloning in late 2006. - The Competitive Enterprise Institute supports permitting milk and meat cloning. - Hello, Dolly. Dolly-the-sheep's cloner gets license to clone human embryos for research. - A 1997 article ponders whether to allow to clone any animals. - "Is it safe?" asked Laurence Olivier as the Nazi dentist in Marathon Man, and who played a Nazi hunter in Boys from Brazil.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:00