Multiple Gestation and Damaged Babies
God’s Will or Human Choice?

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The media rejoiced in 1996 at the apparently healthy birth of the McCaughey septuplets. Cable television glamorized the Gosselins on “Jon & Kate Plus 8.” Rarely did the darker side emerge in the media’s coverage. Call me a curmudgeon, but something stinks here.

Humans too often generalize from a few well-publicized cases (witness the ban on commercial surrogacy after the Baby M case). In France – where the French zealously pursue pregnancy because the government financially awards the birth of each new baby – use of fertility drugs has led to a tenfold increase in the number of triplets and thirtyfold increase in the number of quadruplets since 1982.

With so many babies delivered during one birth, some complain about the costs to society, and gestation and birth of the septuplets probably cost a cool million dollars. Others complain that the human uterus did not evolve to bear litters, making multiples unnatural. Still others wonder how Bobbi McCaughey’s body and health will be affected.

Although these complaints matter, they are morally secondary. Costs can be spread over millions of payers, and unnatural in one era becomes normal in the next (witness anesthesia). Also, if Mrs. McCaughey made an informed choice, she is free to risk injuring her body in childbirth as she sees fit.

My real worry concerns the children’s wellbeing. The McCaugheys took Pergonal, a fertility drug, conceived seven embryos, and refused to terminate any because any terrible results were “God’s will.” In doing so, they risked the health and lives of their babies.

Why? Multiple-birth babies are: usually premature (each may weigh less than two pounds); three times as likely to be severely handicapped at birth; and often spend months in neonatal intensive care units. During gestation, nutrients and oxygenated blood in the womb are scarce (a uterine lifeboat, if you will); thus, not all of seven fetuses will likely emerge healthy. To prevent disabilities resulting from uterine deprivation, physicians recommend “selective reduction” of all but 1 or 2 embryos.

At their fourth birthday in 2001, the McCaughey septuplets lagged in development and were not all potty trained. Joel suffered seizures; Nathan had spastic diplegia, a form of cerebral palsy requiring botox injections (to paralyze spastic muscles) and orthopedic braces. Alexis had hypotonic quadriplegia, a cerebral palsy that causes muscle weakness.

After two major orthopaedic surgeries, Nathan still could not walk at age seven. Alexis had an indwelling feeding tube for four years. Although the McCaugheys homeschool, they sent Nathan and Alexis in 2006...
It is irresponsible to say, as the McCaugheys did, that it was God’s will that two of their children now have cerebral palsy. If God was clear about anything in this case, it was that the McCaugheys should not have had kids. Otherwise, why did He make them infertile?

If you take a fertility drug and conceive too many embryos, you should reduce the embryos for the good of your unborn-children. You shouldn’t create severely-disabled kids and attribute it to “God’s will.” You should take responsibility for creating damaged kids.

NBC News once featured the quintuplets of Denise Amen and her husband, who were offered the chance to reduce and did not. One of her babies was born blind and others are developmentally challenged.

In 1985, a Mormon couple, Patti and Sam Frustaci, conceived septuplets. Informed of the risks and urged to reduce, they refused. Four of their seven babies died, and the three survivors had severe disabilities, including cerebral palsy. The Frustacis then sued their physicians.

And in a 1996 case in England, Mandy Allwood conceived seven or eight embryos at once. Offered a large cash bonus by a tabloid for exclusive rights if all made it to term, Mandy announced she would not reduce. As a result, all of them died.

In a case of a multiple pregnancy in West Virginia, a mother refused selective reduction, but only one child survived; it was blind, paraplegic, and severely retarded. Her infertility-physician said that he would no longer accept women who rejected selective reduction because he couldn’t stand creating disabled babies.

Not too many people are interested in long-term follow-up, yet it is important to do it.

Of the five Canadian Dionne quintuplets in 1934, although all seemed healthy at birth, only three lived to old age (one died at age 20 of an epileptic seizure). Nor did they lead happy lives, because their parents exploited their fame.

Nadya Suleman had six embryos left over from previous in-vitro fertilization treatments and underwent another cycle of IVF to implant all. Nadya already had children from previous cycles of IVF; two of whom were disabled. Two of her six implanted embryos split into twins, resulting in eight embryos. When first-trimester sonograms revealed many fetuses, Suleman refused reduction, and physicians later delivered eight babies. She later raised all the children on public assistance, and exhausted her own mother and father (who felt compelled to help her raise their grandchildren).

Kate and Jon Gosselin had twin girls, born from insemination of Jon’s sperm in 2000. They wanted more, so fertility doctors injected Kate with drugs to stimulate her ovaries to release more than one egg (as in the McCaughey case) before introducing Jon’s sperm. Six embryos resulted, and the Gosselins chose not to reduce. In 2004, physicians delivered eight babies by caesarean. A 2007 television series glamorized the controlled chaos of this family of ten children. A plastic surgeon did free plastic surgery on Kate’s stomach to correct the damage from carrying six babies.

In 2009, after both Gosselins had extra-marital affairs, they divorced. Thereafter, Jon seemed to abandon his interest in the children. The Gosselins and Nadya Suleman seemed immature, self-absorbed, and not focused on the best interests of their children.

New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani was on a call-in radio show in 2001 when a suicidal, Orthodox Jewish woman with five little babies (three of them identical triplets) said that five babies made her crazy. Although the Mayor got her help, what about others? The same year, Jacqueline Thompson and her husband Linden, parents of sextuplets, were living exhausted on the edge in Washington, D.C. until a radio-caller publicized their plight.

What about the two-year-old sister of the McCaughey septuplets? Will her role in childhood be only to help her mother raise the famous septuplets? Moreover, will the two McCaughey parents be able to give each child the nurturing and one-on-one parenting that is ideal? Would you want to grow up with one-seventh of the attention you got from your dad? I wonder if the McCaugheys will have the time, energy, and money to allow each child to develop to his full potential.

The United States is a long way from a philosophically consistent policy on fetal rights and reproductive responsibility. The Supreme Court of South Carolina recently ruled that a mother can be prosecuted for using cocaine in her pregnancy because the usage harms her fetus. In 2002, the President’s Council on
Bioethics said that there should be a federal law against originating a child by cloning because of possible harm to the baby. Yet when McCaugheys, Gosselins, and Sulemans create disabled children, they are glamorized. Something seems akilter here.

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