

XENOTRANSPLANTATION : THE ETHICAL ISSUES

Martin Wilkinson

Associate Professor, Department of Political
Studies, University of Auckland

Medical ethics

Xenotransplantation (XT) is currently at the research stage.

Ethical research is supposed to be:

- in *equipoise* (i.e. being a subject in a trial is expected to be neither better nor worse than receiving the best alternative treatment)
- Performed on subjects who give free informed consent

It is possible that an XT research trial could be neither

- e.g. trial is worse than alternative treatment
and/or
- subjects so desperate they agree without properly considering the real risks and benefits

BUT

These problems, if they are problems, are generic ones that can be handled in the normal research ethics framework.

Playing God?

Because XT involves material from different species, some people might object on grounds of:

e.g. wrongfully playing God or acting against nature.

- The objection is not a good one. Not many really object to antibiotics for a staph infection, although that could equally be seen as playing God or interfering with nature.
- The Bioethics Council deliberation also showed that few people thought the objection meant *other people* should be stopped from receiving XT.

Animal rights

‘XT harms animals used as subjects of XT or as the raw material for XT.’

This is a serious objection.

But the issues raised are common across much medical and scientific research.

Disease risk

XT can create a risk of contagious disease, including disease that spreads beyond the XT recipient.

The risk takes XT out of the purely private sphere. Other people have a legitimate interest in not being infected.

However

- Risk of disease is highly variable. Transplanting a baboon's heart is riskier than transplanting porcine islet cells.
- Society tolerates the imposition of some risk on others e.g. the risk of car accidents, or the spread of disease from jet travel. The risk from SOME types of XT is low enough to be managed rather than having XT banned.
- The disease risk of XT may warrant some restrictions on XT recipients e.g. entry on a register, no withdrawal of data from trials, routine monitoring of symptoms.

Public deliberation: New Zealand's experience

- In the Bioethics Council's large scale deliberation (2005), we found that by and large the public would be willing to let XT proceed, subject to adequate safety, animal welfare, and ethical regulation.
- The Council's deliberative process and subsequent report clearly played a substantial role in the decision to allow XT to proceed in NZ.
- A lesson: proper deliberation not only has democratic advantages, it helps with making robust accepted policy.