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Expert says genetic technology could enhance our children's well-being

"We have a moral obligation to treat and prevent disease"

International ethics expert, Professor Julian Savulescu says that we are morally obliged to enhance our children's health and well-being and that rapidly developing genetic technologies could be a way to achieve this.

Professor Savulescu, Uehiro Professor of Practical Ethics at Oxford University, is in Australia for ASMR Medical Research Week® as the 2005 Medallist for the Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR).

"There is a moral obligation to treat and prevent disease," claimed Professor Savulescu. "The same moral obligation exists to enhance our children's well-being. Our health and that of our children is our most precious investment. Disease causes pain and stops us engaging in those activities which give meaning to life. It has an enormous impact on the economy and society. Being healthy enables us to achieve well-being and provides individuals with the opportunity to have the best life. A 'well' society is a viable society."

Genetic technology is currently used to test for the presence of genetic disorders (including some forms of cancer and heart disease) in unborn children. There is research being conducted on genes to identify athletic talent which may one day be used in Olympic selection. There are also studies in the field of behavioral genetics to understand the genetic basis of criminal behavior, addictive behavior, sexual behaviour, industriousness, intelligence and depression. While at present there are no genetic tests for these complex behaviors, it may be possible in the future to genetically test for them in our offspring and even to change how we are predisposed to behave.

"Genetic technology is a rapidly developing reality. If this can provide us with the ability to enhance more effectively our children's well-being, to give them better opportunities of a better life, to fail to do so will be to be responsible for the consequences, including their unhappiness," Professor Savulescu said. "Many people already seek enhancement through nicotine and caffeine. Prozac, recreational drugs and alcohol all enhance mood. Viagra is used to improve sexual performance. Performance enhancement is rife in sport. Our frame of reference must shift to rationally consider genetic enhancements."

He cautioned that genetic enhancement of our health and behavioral capacities is a highly complex and contentious issue. Many people and groups will have concerns with this approach and their views must be considered. Cost issues and social and societal impact must also be addressed and it is critical that only ethical enhancements which are expected to bring more benefit than harm to the individual be pursued.

"Our future is in our hands. By not allowing ethical genetic enhancement using emerging technologies, we are choosing to enter Nature's lottery rather than utilising safe and cost-effective interventions which may radically improve our health and well-being," said Professor Savulescu.

ASMR President, A/Professor Bronwyn Kingwell said, "ASMR believes it is essential that the community is well informed on these issues. Professor Savulescu has highlighted the potential for emerging technologies to radically improve the health and well being of the next generation of

Australians. Australian health and medical researchers have contributed extensively to the knowledge underpinning these technologies. An open debate is essential to ensure that governments and industry address these complex issues in a rational and ethical manner.”

For interviews with Professor Savulescu, contact: Dr Sarah Meachem on 0412 640 774
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