

Humanist Perspective

Medical ethics

A humanist approach

Humanists try to be rational and use **evidence** to guide their decision making. They also try to be ethical, showing **empathy** towards others, valuing respect for **personal autonomy**, and a concern for human wellbeing. They believe this is the **one life** we have, and that everyone should have the **freedom** and opportunity to find **happiness** in the here and now.

Humanists believe science provides the best method for gaining knowledge about the world. However, they recognise that science can be used for both positive and negative ends. The knowledge provided by science itself is morally neutral; how we apply it is not. Humanists believe we need to apply human values to scientific practice, acting in ways that benefit human beings while minimising harm.

Over recent decades humanity has uncovered many medical advances with the potential to improve our health and change our lives for the better – from organ donation, to in-vitro fertilisation treatments that support people to have children, to the use of embryonic stem cells and gene editing to cure disease. However, some of these new medical practices have raised challenging questions about human nature, and uncertainties about what is morally the best action to take.



Debates around medical technology often push at the boundaries of ethics. They raise philosophical questions that were often not considered by thinkers long ago. Humanists recognise that such questions are not always easy to answer. For them, decisions need to be based on the best available **evidence** and research. We should consider the **rights** and dignity of the people involved, and the **consequences** of any action we take. In particular, we should ask whether the potential benefits outweigh the potential harms. Humanists will typically support those practices that benefit human health and wellbeing (as long as they do not cause significant harm to other animals or the planet) and oppose those that do not.

Questions humanists might ask:

- Where can I get reliable evidence-based information to inform my position?
- What are the potential benefits and to whom do these benefits apply (e.g. the individual, all human beings, future generations, other animals, the planet)?
- What are the risks?

Some humanists might support the precautionary principle that suggests we should be cautious when experimenting with new innovations if scientific knowledge on the matter is lacking. However, humanists might also argue that all progress involves taking risks and some risk can be justified if the potential gains are great enough. What we do should be based on the best available evidence we have.

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Challenges to medical progress

'We are interfering with nature'

Sometimes people worry that medical advances are interfering with the natural order of things. However, it is important to remember that human beings already interfere with nature in many ways that generally cause people little concern, and are supported by most people for the benefits they provide. For example wearing clothes, riding bikes, or taking medicine.

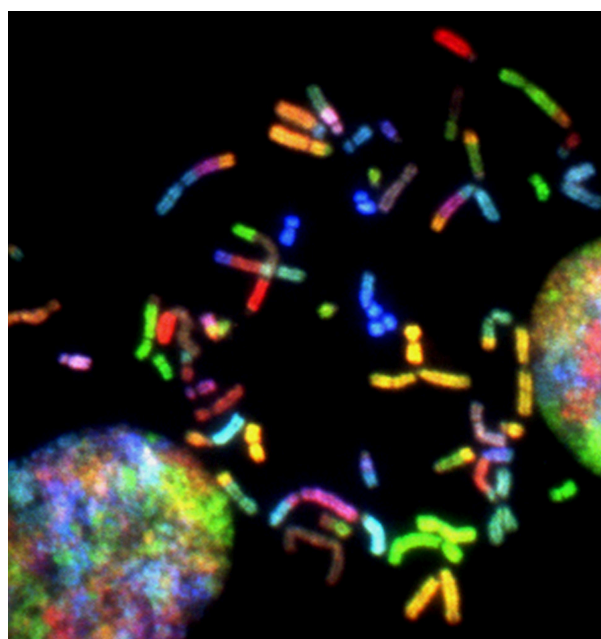
'We should not play god'

Humanists do not believe in a god so, for them, questions about what we should or should not do depend on the consequences on human beings and other sentient animals. The same objection could also be applied to any form of medicine or surgery. A humanist might also query why a benevolent god would give us the capacity to make our lives better and healthier and then forbid us from doing so.

'This is a slippery slope'

It is sometimes asked 'Where will all this end?' often with the assumption that the final outcome can only be negative. Humanists might respond that where it ends is up to us. If new technology supports longer, happier lives then they will typically say that that is a good thing. If the harms likely outweigh the benefits, then we should press stop. Of course, such questions can often be difficult to answer and it is best to proceed with care, seeking evidence as we go.

It is important to remember that it is not for scientists alone to decide how to use their research - it is a decision for society, and that means all of us. Humanists believe decisions should be made democratically on the basis of the best available evidence. Humanists UK has often contributed a humanist perspective to debates and Government consultations on issues of medical ethics.



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Organ donation

Sometimes people experience organ failure or other life-threatening conditions which mean that they urgently require the donation of an organ from someone else to stay alive. Humanists generally support organ donation as it aligns with many of their beliefs and values:

- Organ donation is a kind and **compassionate** act that can improve, or even save, the lives of others.
- Humanists believe that we should have the freedom and **autonomy** to make informed decisions about our own bodies.
- Humanists believe we should try to use our scientific knowledge to make ethical choices that improve human **wellbeing**.

Humanists also believe that this is the **one life** we have. They regard our bodies as biological entities whose function ends at death. They do not believe that respect for the dead means we must object to the use of a deceased person's organs to help others, except when the deceased has expressed a contrary wish. Although they don't believe in an afterlife, humanists do believe that the choices we make can continue to have an impact on others after we are gone. Organ donation can be one way for our lives to have an ongoing positive impact on others.

Some humanists would see those who volunteer to donate organs (for example a kidney) while still alive as worthy of moral admiration. However they would recognise that we have no moral obligations to do so and this should typically only be done provided one can sacrifice an organ without significant harm to one's own quality of life. Humanists might also argue that we need to carefully consider the ethics of organ donation, ensuring that people remain free from coercion and that we should be wary of potential commercialisation of the practice.



'As a humanist I believe that we only get one life so we have to make it count, and I think that it's equally important to support other people in making the most of their lives too. We can do that while we are alive but we can also do it in death as organ donors... I believe we can't take our organs with us when we die and being an organ donor means you can save or improve the lives of people on the waiting list for a transplant.'

Jamie Theakston,
radio and TV presenter



Questions

- 1) Have you done something right or wrong if you decide not to donate your organs?
- 2) How important does a moral principle need to be for you to let someone die rather than transgress that moral principle?

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Organ donation

'Opt-in' or 'opt-out'

- An 'opt-in' system requires people to have given their consent for their organs to be donated after they die.
- An 'opt-out' system is one where a person is presumed to have consented to their organs being donated, unless they have specifically stated otherwise and their family members know of no prior objection. People are free to change their mind at any point.

In 2018, the UK's shortage of available donor organs was so severe that it was forecast that three people on the waiting list for donor organs would die unnecessarily in hospitals every day. While 80% of people said they would happily donate their organs when they died, only 36% got around to registering as organ donors before they died.

Humanists might point to this **evidence** as backing up an 'opt-out' system of organ donation to help save lives, while also respecting people's personal autonomy to opt-out if they so wish. Humanists UK campaigned for the UK to move from an 'opt-in' to an 'opt-out' system. As of 2023, the 'opt-out' organ donation system is now in effect across all of the UK.



Patron of Humanists UK, **Roy Calne** (1930–2024) had a remarkable career that revolutionised transplant surgery. He performed several first transplant operations, including the first liver transplant operation in Europe in 1968 and the world's first liver, heart, and lung transplant in 1987. His groundbreaking work saved countless lives and paved the way for advancements in the field.

Blood donation

For similar reasons to their support for organ donation, many humanists also recognise the positive value of blood donation. Donating blood saves lives with little cost to ourselves. There is no requirement for humanists to donate blood but many do.

Janet Vaughan (1899–1993) was a medical scientist. Before and during the Second World War, she helped pioneer and organise the system for mass blood donation, earning her the nickname 'The Mother of English Blood Banking.'



'It seemed to me that medicine was a good way of getting involved in real social problems.'

'If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.'

Peter Singer, humanist philosopher

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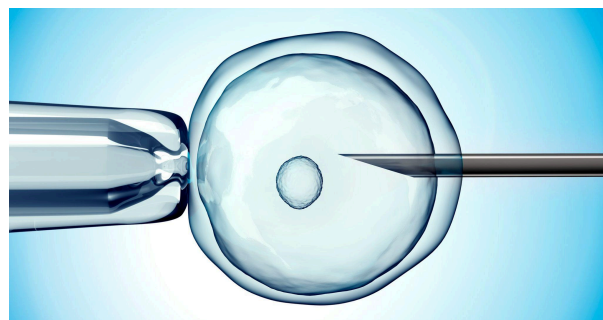


Assisted conception

For many people and families, it is not easy to conceive a child. This can be for a range of reasons. Today there exist many means of medical assistance to conception. Through in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), fertility drugs, artificial insemination, sperm and egg donation, and surrogate pregnancies we are increasingly able to intervene to help people have children.

Humanists believe we should try to use our scientific knowledge to make ethical choices that improve human **wellbeing**. Believing this is the **one life** we have, humanists try to support people to lead **happy** and fulfilling lives in the here and now and believe people should have the **freedom** to live their lives as they wish, provided they are not causing harm to others. Therefore, if people desire to be a parent, and there are no justified reasons to oppose this, humanists support their right to access assisted conception. Humanists celebrate the rights of people to form families guided by their own autonomous choices and know that 'naturally conceived' children are no better or more important than those children whose birth has involved medical support.

As supporters of **equality**, many humanists believe that access to assisted conception should also be available to single people, older couples, and LGBT families. IVF and other forms of assisted conception can be hard to access and expensive. Humanists have stood alongside LGBT individuals and organisations in pushing for greater and fairer access to medical support. Humanists do not accept that your age, location, sexuality, or gender identity should stand in the way of being able to have a family where mutual love and caregiving can provide important sources of meaning and happiness. When the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill made its way through parliament in 2008, humanists voiced their support for the Bill's intention to provide equal access to fertility treatments.



Surrogacy

Surrogacy means that an additional person is involved in the process – the surrogate mother who carries the child for nine months and then gives birth. In deciding whether such a practice should be allowed, humanists would typically say we should look at the **evidence** as to whether there is a negative impact on the surrogate mother or child, or whether there are risks of people being exploited through such a practice.

In-vitro fertilisation (IVF)

Sometimes people disapprove of IVF as the process often involves the creation of additional embryos that might have had the potential to become people were they implanted in a womb. However, these embryos would not exist were it not for the IVF process in the first place. It could therefore be argued that there is little moral difference here to natural conceptions that fail to come to term.



- 1) Does everyone who wants a child have the right to have a child?
- 2) Should we deny people the chance to be parents when we have methods that could help them?

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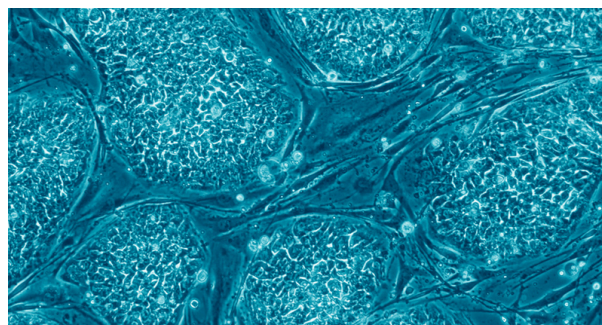


Embryology and stem cell research

Stem cell research is an area of medical science that offers hope for a better understanding of how some life-threatening diseases occur, such as leukaemia, diabetes, and Parkinson's, and for treating or even preventing such diseases. Stem cells come from human embryos (under 14 days of age). They are pluripotent, meaning they can develop into any type of cell in the body and can be used to regenerate or repair diseased tissue and organs. Many humanists welcome their use in medical contexts to save and improve the lives of countless people. However, humanists also typically support evidence-based ethical guidelines for such practice.

Humanists support **human rights** and **human wellbeing**. Therefore, in the case of research using embryos, they will likely focus on two questions: whether an embryo is indeed a person with rights, and whether the use of stem cells would likely do more good than harm.

An embryo has few of the characteristics we would normally associate with being a person. Its cells have not yet formed into the specialist cells that would form particular parts of the body. It has no brain, no consciousness, no self-awareness, no emotions, and no capacity to feel pleasure or pain. For humanists, this evidence can support our decision making. Some might argue that an embryo is a potential person. However, it is often the case that the embryo would not even exist were it not for its role in medical research. Most embryos are the product of IVF treatment for people seeking medical support to have a baby. Normally any left-over embryos would be disposed of. One might ask whether therefore it is better that they be used in a way that benefits human health. Many humanists would, however, accept that the donors of the egg or sperm should still have a right to not consent to any embryos being used in such research.

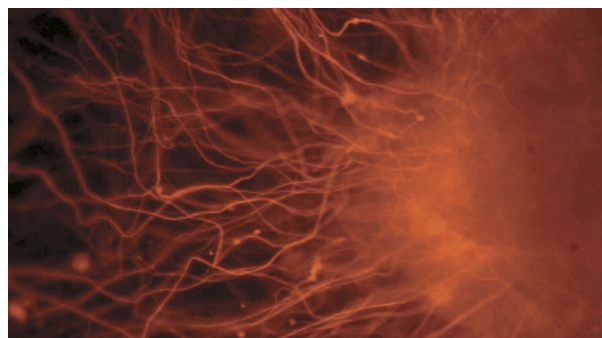


Mary Warnock was a humanist philosopher who chaired the committee of inquiry (1982–84) into human fertilisation, which laid down guidelines on embryo research. The report recommended that research on human embryos be allowed but with clear regulation, including that research should not continue beyond 14 days after fertilisation. Warnock believed firmly that morality should be distinct from religion, and that religious beliefs should not form the basis of laws or public policy, although the opinions of all should be included and considered.

When the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill made its way through parliament in 2008, humanists voiced their support:

'We support the Bill and consider that it will allow vital, life-saving and life-enhancing stem cell research – of which the majority of the public is in favour... We call on MPs to base their decisions on rational debate and ethics based on human values, and on the best interests of alleviating the suffering of real people and future generations.'

Naomi Phillips, Humanists UK



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Embryology and stem cell research

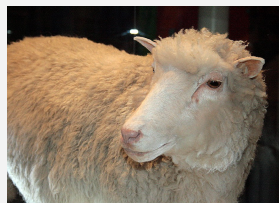
Cloning

Stem cell research is also known as *therapeutic* cloning. This is legal in the UK. It is different from *reproductive* cloning where a new person would be created who is a near replica of their single parent. This is illegal in the UK. Given the absence of clear benefits, the uncertainty over possible physical or psychological harm, and the potential risks to people's human rights (such as the exploitation of the clone), many humanists would support the current legal position.

Benefits might become apparent in the future, but many humanists believe we would need good reasons and careful regulation to pursue this type of medical practice.

Ian Wilmut was an embryologist who focused on the use of science to cure disease. Witnessing his father's illness and suffering from diabetes motivated his interest in biotechnology and its potential.

Wilmut was the leader of the research group that successfully cloned '**Dolly the sheep**' in 1996 – the first mammal to be cloned. Dolly proved the process was possible and helped further human understanding of stem cells, including the pluripotent cells used today in medical practice.



Wilmut recognised the concerns some people might have about working with embryos, but believed the benefits were more important: 'I respect the early embryo and have duties to it, but I passionately believe these are overridden by the duty we have to people.'

Photo of Dolly the sheep by Toni Barros



Saviour siblings

Sometimes when a child is sick, a stem cell (or bone marrow) transplant from another person can potentially provide a cure. This replaces damaged blood cells with healthy cells and can be used to treat diseases such as leukaemia and lymphoma.

The difficulty is that such a transplant requires a very close genetic match between the donor and the person who needs the donation. Often the best chance of finding a match is a brother or sister. Parents may therefore decide to have another child to provide such a transplant and to try to save the life of the child who is ill. This often requires in-vitro fertilisation so that the embryo can be selected to ensure the best match between the siblings and increase the chance of a successful transplant.

Many humanists would support such a practice as long as the new child is wanted and loved and not simply seen as a means to an end. There is no evidence that this would not be the case.

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Biotechnology & genetic engineering

'Genetic engineering is not, of itself, either bad or good. It depends on what you engineer.'

Richard Dawkins, scientist

Biotechnology has emerged as a scientific field of research. This is where biologists work to solve problems using natural organisms. Genetic engineering is a form of biotechnology that is used to help to fight disease and to improve food production.

By experimenting with genes, it is possible that we will find cures for diseases such as cancers and cystic fibrosis. We may be able to make choices about what our children will be like before they are born. It is also possible that we may bring extinct animals back to life or be able to create completely new species. Research in these new fields of science is still in its early days, and while some of the benefits are obvious, the longer term risks are still difficult to assess. Public understanding is low and this has raised concerns about such practice.

Many humanists welcome the potential of biotechnology to solve problems, in particular to fight hunger and disease. As in any other area of scientific innovation, humanists would want to see any practice informed by robust **evidence** and a consideration of the **consequences**, with **human rights** respected and humans and animals treated with **compassion**. Typically, the key question they will want to ask is whether there is sufficient evidence that the potential benefits outweigh the potential harms.

Genetically modified (GM) food

People used to describe genetically modified food as 'Frankenstein-food' and many were worried about the risks to human beings and the surrounding ecosystem. However, the evidence has shown that GM food supports food production and is safe for humans, other animals, and the environment.

It is worth noting that human beings have been carrying out genetic engineering for a long time, selectively breeding crops and animals for food or pets. Farmed peas are 10 times the volume of their wild ancestors while bulldogs and poodles look very different from wolves. One potential consequence is that, while natural selection over long periods of time allows genes time to become compatible with other genes in the gene pool, selective breeding speeds things up. That can lead to problems, such as Pekingese dogs having difficulties with their breathing. Gene editing technology means changes happen at an even faster rate and sometimes uses genes from other species altogether, increasing the risk of unknown consequences.



Gene therapy

Gene therapy is a process that works by replacing a defective or missing gene in a patient's cells with a healthy version of that gene, potentially curing them of a disease. In cases where there is strong evidence that this can improve health and reduce suffering, and where patients can provide informed consent, humanists are generally supportive.

Somatic therapy replaces a defective gene in a particular body tissue and only affects the individual patient. Germline therapy, however, injects new genetic information into sex cells (sperm or eggs), meaning the consequences can be passed on to future generations, and creating uncertainty about long term effects. Germline therapy is currently illegal in the UK and many other countries. Recognising the need for evidence-informed decision making, many humanists would support this while further research takes place.

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Genetic risks and 'designer babies'

Today, we are able to detect certain genetic risks of ill health before a baby is born. That creates opportunities for potential parents to make decisions about whether to go ahead with a pregnancy, depending on the seriousness of those risks to the potential child. Humanists are typically **pro-choice** when it comes to abortion and reproductive rights, and believe such knowledge can help inform decisions over whether to bring a new child into the world.

Developments in genetic engineering may mean that, in the future, we could select many of the characteristics of our children. This could include lowering their risk from particular diseases, through to deciding their eye or hair colour, or improving their likely intelligence or athletic ability. Again, humanists would want to weigh up the likely wider risks and benefits.



Humanists UK supports the ban on sex selection of embryos, except for serious medical reasons.

Transhumanism is a belief that we should be allowed to use science and technology to modify and enhance human intelligence and abilities beyond current biological constraints. Some humanists, such as the biologist Julian Huxley (1887-1975), believed that this would benefit humanity, but not all humanists would agree. As with many ethical questions, it depends on the particular enhancement and the potential wider consequences.

Human enhancement

'We tend to think that there is such a thing as human nature but of course that is evolving and being modified all the time by our experiences and by our education and by the environment... Suppose our ancestors about seven and a half million years ago got together and said "Simian nature – it's a wonderful thing. We must not allow any further evolution because we are just great as we are."'

John Harris, philosopher

Some humanists might support human enhancement through genetic engineering as a way to improve our quality of life. After all, we already enhance our capacities through technology such as reading glasses or binoculars. What is important, for many humanists, is not whether an enhancement is new or unusual, but whether it makes our lives better.

However, many humanists are also cautious, recognising that human enhancement may lead to inequality between those who can and cannot afford it, and to unhealthy new societal norms and expectations. In the past, some people promoted eugenics as a means of improving human nature, with many terrible consequences. On the question of inequality, one might respond that we have rarely denied people potential improvements in their health and wellbeing until those benefits were available to everyone. Why should genetic engineering be any different? Should nobody benefit until everybody can?

These opportunities raise difficult questions, and humanists typically believe they should be approached by looking at the **evidence** and applying concern for human **wellbeing** and **human rights**. Assessing the potential benefits and risks is crucial and strong ethical oversight of any such practice would be necessary.

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Circumcision

Humanists support people's personal freedoms to make choices over their own lives so long as they are not causing harm to others or restricting other people's freedoms. While parents have some rights to make decisions about their children's upbringing, humanists argue that children are also human beings with **rights** of their own. They have **bodily autonomy** (the right to make choices about one's own body without violence or harm). Just as humanists defend children's freedom to think for themselves, they also defend children's **freedom** from any surgeries imposed on them which aren't medically necessary and for which they are too young to consent.

Many children are subject to unnecessary procedures that they are unable to refuse. For example, circumcision – where parts of the genitals are removed – is a practice performed on children all over the world. Humanists generally oppose such coercive procedures. Many humanists respect the right of different cultures and worldviews to carry out traditional practices so long as they do not cause unnecessary harm.



Femal genital mutilation has a lifelong impact on psychology, sexuality, and childbirth. It is a religious and cultural attempt to suppress women's sexuality... We must all work to end this unnecessary, traumatic violation.'

Selasie A. Djameh,
Humanist Association of Ghana

Humanists try to look at the **evidence** to inform their ethical decision-making and to evaluate medical procedures. They believe the law should do the same.

Male circumcision is legal in the UK. While the practice may have some health benefits (such as a reduced risk of certain infections), these benefits can often be achieved through other means (e.g. hygiene and safe sex practices). It is also a risky procedure which can sometimes lead to psychological, sexual, and other physical problems. Therefore, for many humanists, routine circumcision is seen as unnecessary, and some humanists would like to see male circumcision banned unless carried out for a medically necessary reason as agreed by doctors.

Humanists UK supports the UK's legal position that prohibits the genital mutilation of girls (FGM – female genital mutilation). It has no medical benefits. Rather, the procedure can cause severe medical complications including bleeding, difficulties with urination, cysts, infections, risks during childbirth, and an increase in infant mortality. It also seeks to limit, and often succeeds in limiting, women's opportunities for sexual pleasure.

Anyone who performs or aids the performance of FGM on a UK citizen can receive up to 14 years in prison. This includes taking someone abroad to carry out FGM in a different country.