
The Issue
What is the relationship between human dignity and non-embryonic human tissue?

The Background
Most discussions on human dignity so far have focused on the disputed meaning of “human dignity” and the ethical status of human embryos and embryonic stem cells. The authors of this article want to broaden the ethical discussion (i) by shifting the focus to non-embryonic human tissue (which, they say, involves the majority of genetic research), and (ii) by taking a “both-and” approach to human dignity (i.e. “multidimensional”), rather than “either-or.”

There is also the social background: the growing importance of genetic material for research and identification in industrialised societies, which raises up new ethical questions on the connections between human biology and human worth.

The Authors’ Approach

Basic ethical starting point: Human dignity is multidimensional. It is “both-and”: it is both “absolute” and “contingent,” both “innate” and “acquired.” (Note: in public ethical discourse, people who strongly advocate an “absolute” view of human dignity tend to identify as “pro-life,” while those who concentrate on the “contingent” view tend to emphasise “quality of life.” There is, however, a nuance: claiming absolute human dignity on the basis of human autonomy may lead to different end-of-life decisions than someone claiming absolute dignity on the basis of being made in the image of God.) In line with a “both-and” approach, the authors also claim that human dignity is not based on “either this or that” human capacity or quality, but the whole spectrum of human potential, qualities and capacities.

Relating the basic ethical principle to bioethics: The authors then claim that “human tissue” (note: this is an article about “non-embryonic” human tissue) is without moral agency and personhood, and therefore is without human dignity in its own right. However, they still claim that “human tissue” is related to human dignity. Genetic material determines one’s physical appearance and sex, which has moral relevance when it comes to issues of racism and sexism. Human tissue is used in medical practices, which is related to the ethical issues of organ donation and blood donation. Human tissue is also used in biomedical research, which has an ethical connection to finding treatments for diseases and genetically acquired conditions, and respect for the human dignity of researchers, doctors and patients.

Applying the results to prescribe a course of action: For the practice of donating human tissue, there is a need to respect the “absolute” human dignity “symbolised” by the human genes (i.e. it has meaning for human beings as a representative of human nature) and the “contingent” human dignity present in the ethical motives of the donors. There is also a need to respect the ethical beliefs of the researcher regarding what constitutes human dignity and how it can be upheld, when asking the researcher to undertake various methods of genetic research (i.e. respect for genetic material vs. finding treatments efficiently).