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BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

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- No letter should be more than 400 words.
- For letters on scientific subjects we normally reserve our correspondence columns for those relating to issues discussed recently (within six weeks) in the *BMJ*.
- We do not routinely acknowledge letters. Please send a stamped addressed envelope if you would like an acknowledgment.
- Because we receive many more letters than we can publish we may shorten those we do print, particularly when we receive several on the same subject.

The fertility debate and the media

SIR,—Mr James Owen Drife's review (10 October, p 916) of the BBC's new scientific programme *Antenna*, which attempted to address some of the clinical and ethical issues associated with assisted reproduction, gave the programme more credence than it deserved. Sensational it might have been; completely factual it was not.

We were given a categorical assurance by the producer that the programme would be centred on specific issues associated with the new fertility technology, rather than on personalities, yet in the final programme the emphasis was reversed. It turned out to be "trial by television" of one of us (IC), who was unable to respond adequately to alarmist claims made by other doctors against his professional practice since he was unaware of the real content of the programme until it was screened. Some responses to the assertions made were "edited out," thereby making the programme more sensational. It is regrettable that some doctors, including fertility specialists, should criticise and disparage their colleagues in the media rather than express differences of opinion at scientific meetings and in medical journals.

Your reviewer can be excused from assuming that Dr Nicholson's criticisms had the authority of the hospital's ethical committee, but this was not the case. Indeed, it is understandable that some innocent viewers should conclude that unprofessional activities were taking place, since the complete story was not told. Nothing could be further from the truth, since our 12 strong medical team has the full support of both the hospital's ethical committee and its management.

It is certainly true that there have been difficult

discussions on certain contentious topics, but a consensus opinion has always evolved. Nevertheless, confidential minutes from the ethical committee were leaked to the press in early 1987, and other confidential minutes were also shown on the *Antenna* programme. Is it ethical that such action should have occurred?

So what can we believe in this current debate? Recently, *The Times* reported that "Professor Craft regularly transfers more than 10 embryos."¹ The *Nursing Times* in an interview with the chairman of the Voluntary Licensing Authority, Dame Mary Donaldson, reported that we transfer up to 15 embryos.² The *Antenna* programme and your reviewer made the same comment. We have never transferred more than 12 embryos, and only 1% of patients have ever received eight or more. The reason for so doing has been to attempt to achieve a pregnancy in a very few difficult patients with polycystic ovaries in whom all previous treatments have failed. We will shortly publish evidence supporting a flexible approach to treatment using a variable number of oocytes to suit the individual circumstances of patients. This follows analysis of the results of 1000 gamete intrafallopian transfer procedures of known outcome.

There has been a recent spate of adverse and sometimes inaccurate comments associated with doctors' involvement both in national newspapers and on the television. The *Daily Express* recently carried a photograph and story of Britain's supposed first "test tube" twins going to school.³ They subsequently appeared on the BBC *Wogan* programme (14 October) along with the supposed first "test tube" triplets, together with the fertility

specialist associated with their parents' care. Neither of these claims are correct. The first reported UK twins and triplets are now approaching 4 and 3 years of age respectively, and they did not occur as a consequence of treatment at that particular centre. Why are such inaccuracies perpetuated?

The whole subject of assisted reproduction is under public scrutiny and rightly so. However, if society is to make informed judgments on all the issues it must at least be told the whole truth, and all the evidence must be presented. Inaccurate reporting does this complex subject a disservice, as indeed do doctors who criticise each other in public. It is our patients who will be losers if the truth is not fully told.

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- 1 Wright P. "Barbaric" research on babies denied. *The Times* 1987; Oct 10:3.
- 2 Crabbe G. Licensed to live. *Nursing Times* 1987; Oct 14:20.
- 3 Lee J. Test tube twins in top form. *Daily Express* 1987; Sept 8:3.

^{99m}Tc-Sucralfate scintigraphy and colonic disease

SIR,—We were as unimpressed as Mr A George and colleagues (5 September, p 578) with the value of ^{99m}Tc-Sucralfate in the diagnosis of inflammatory colonic disease after a study of 11 patients with inflammatory bowel disease.¹