Life, death and medical ethics

Contributed by YouGov
Monday, 05 September 2005
Last Updated Monday, 05 September 2005

YouGov has conducted a major study of medical ethics for the Daily Telegraph, covering a number of topical and controversial issues, to do with abortion, stem cell research, "cloning" and euthanasia. Most questions produce emphatic results:
Abortion: 64% of the public want the current law tightened (although only 6% want abortions banned altogether). Women are keener than men on tightening the law, with 76% wanting the current 24 week limit reduced, or abortions banned, and only 19% wanting the current limit maintained or increased. Men divide 50%-26% between tightening and not tightening the law.
Apart from the specific issue of the time limit, most people who have a view think that the present arrangements for obtaining abortions are broadly satisfactory. However, among the large minority who disagree, ten times as many people (30%) think it is too easy rather than too hard (3%) to obtain an abortion.

The country is divided on whether abortion should be free on demand, with 41% thinking it should, and 48% saying it should not. Under 35s favour abortion on demand by 53-34%, but over 55s oppose it by 61-29%.
Embryo and stem-cell research: Two-thirds of the public approve of the current law allow "spare" early human embryos left over from fertility treatment to be used for medical research up to 14 days after conception. Only one person in five disagrees. And by a similar margin, most people think the rights of patients are more important than the rights of early embryos.
However, opinion is evenly divided on whether it is acceptable to create human embryos solely for the purposes of medical research, with 41% saying this is acceptable and 46% saying it is not. Men divide 53-35% in favour, while women divide 56-30% against.
More generally, eight out of ten people approve of stem cell research, although opinions differ as to whether it should be used only for research into life-threatening diseases, for any medical research, and/or for research into cosmetics (a purpose approved by only 7%). Just 9% say the use of stem cell research is never acceptable.
Cloning and genetic modification: People were asked what the law should be, were it to become safe both for the baby and the mother for human beings to be cloned. 60% would ban it - either altogether (30%) or for the foreseeable future (a further 30%). 20% would allow it to help infertile couples to have children, while just 10% would allow it without any specific legal restriction.
Another possibility is that doctors might one day be able to modify babies' genetic make-up before they are born. Were this to be feasible, only 2% think the facility should be made available to any parents who wanted it. Two-thirds think it should be allowed to save the child from diseases such as cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer's, or from serious genetic defects. Just 20% think genetic modification should not be allowed for any reason.
By 77-14%, the public thinks parents should NOT be allowed to select the sex of their own children..
Euthanasia: As many as 87% think people should have the right to decide when they want to die, and to ask for medical assistance to help them if they are unable to end their own lives. Only 8% disagree.
Two-thirds agree that people should be allowed to help close relatives who terminally ill to commit suicide, without fear of prosecution.

For further information please visit: http://www.yougov.com/