

**President's Newsletter, August 2008**

Dear Members:

This month we move to the central myth in Egyptian mythology



*Statue of Isis Suckling Horus; Bronze Karnak Late Period (664-332 b.C.)  
Egyptian Museum, Cairo, Egypt*

*In ancient Egypt, Isis was considered the most important feminine divinity: she created the world and was worshipped as the mother of all of nature, including the Sun God. Her husband, Osiris, described as the symbol of the Pharaoh-husband-father and a good a peaceful being, was the God of life and death. However, he lived under the continuous threats of his brother, Seth, who sought the throne of Osiris. Plutarch, in his "History de Iside et Osiride," recounts that once Seth dragged Osiris into a trap and killed him, then put his body in a wood box which he shut and had sealed with lead, and threw into the Nile (sarcophagi were based on the box of this myth). Isis searched for the remains of Osiris until she finally found him embedded in a tree trunk, which was holding up the roof of a palace in Byblos on the Phoenician coast. She managed to remove the coffin and open it, but Osiris was already dead. She used a spell which she had learned from her father to bring him back to life so that he could impregnate her. After they finished, he died again, so she hid his body in the desert. Months later, she gave birth to Horus, who vanquished Seth. Horus came to represent new beginnings. Eventually, Isis became known as the Egyptian goddess of fertility and Horus as god of the sky. This is the first description of post-mortem insemination!!*

In regard to this topic, *Nature* (July 17, 2008) dedicated an editorial and a featured article to the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first baby born by assisted reproduction. Indeed, on July 25, 1978 Louise Brown was delivered by caesarean section at the Oldham General Hospital (Oldham, UK) following in vitro fertilization (IVF) performed by Patrick Steptal and Robert Edwards (November 10, 1977, in Cambridge, UK) on her mother, Lesley Brown, whose fallopian tubes were blocked.

Since then, 4 million babies have been born by IVF. The development of this technique posed several ethical questions (post-mortem IVF, surrogacy, postmenopausal IVF) which, in turn, influenced the

development of bioethics. This field concerns those ethical questions which arise in the relationship between life sciences and philosophy, law and religion. Traditionally, the starting point of bioethics is taken to be the Nuremberg code (1947), drafted for judging physicians and scientists who had conducted biomedical experiments on prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps. However, a real touchstone for bioethics was the Belmont Report (1979), which identified those basic ethical principles and guidelines that should underlie the conduct of biomedical and behavioural research involving human subjects.

The word "bioethics" was first used by the American oncologist, Van Rensselaer Potter II, to describe a new discipline which would bridge the gap between human and experimental sciences (*Bioethics: a bridge to the future*, 1971). With great advances in biotechnology (such as assisted reproduction), new challenges have developed for public health and health policy, and the field has generated at least a dozen English language journals. Throughout the world, governments, universities, and hospitals have developed ethical committees, comprised of physicians, nurses, attorneys, philosophers, theologians, sociologists and basic scientists. Their aim is to state basic ethical principles and guidelines in order to assist decision-makers in resolving the ethical problems.

In his book, *Our post-human future* (2002), the American philosopher, Francis Fukuyama, claims that "the biotechnical revolution will have political consequences" affecting our civilization much like the agricultural or the industrial revolutions. He agrees with Aldous Huxley, who, in his novel, *Brave New World* (1932), envisioned a future world where drugs would ensure that people's every need and desire be met, and in so doing abolish human nature. While this loss of human nature may seem to be a risk claimed only by our classic myths, it seems to draw closer to reality with the advance of biotechnology. The idea of "designing" children before their conception or birth gives rise to a more generalized concept of "personalized genetics," in which anyone can pay for a "read-out" of known genetic risks, or even a personal genomic sequence. The debates on genetic selection will intensify the ethical debate (*Nature*, 454: 253, 2008). These technologies will make their way into the fertility clinics, but scientists and physicians must look to collaborate with philosophers, theologians, and politicians in order to evaluate the non-health-related aspects (intelligence, ambition, behaviours). What is the role that the SGI should have in this debate on bioethics? Do you think that we should arrange a space for a future Annual Meeting on Bioethics? Or to dedicate an SGI Forum to this topic? In Glasgow at the SGI Annual Meeting Sir Ian Wilmut will give the C. D. Christian Distinguished Lecture entitled, "Lessons from the Dolly experiment," which is sure to spark an exciting conversation!!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Felice Petraglia', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Felice Petraglia  
SGI President, 2008-2009