

14 Days to Live

Bioethics

An essay on Bioethics from Salvo #51 in Collateral Damage

by D. Joy Riley

A True Tale of Human Waste

Imagine that you have 14 days to live—only 14 days total. You will be fed a proper diet for your age, and you will be kept warm. During that time, you will be a passive participant in your life, observed by men and women in white coats. No one will talk to you or call you by name, but they will dutifully record observations of your functioning. A "sample" of up to 12.5 percent of your body may be removed for testing.

A decision will be made about your future. If the decision is made to freeze you in liquid nitrogen, you will be properly prepared and then placed inside the freezer. You may stay there for days, weeks, months, or even more than a decade. You will not grow while in the freezer. All of your physiological functions will be arrested at –321 degrees Fahrenheit.¹ Time will stand still while you are in the freezer. The 14-day clock is stopped during that time, and will be restarted only if and when you are thawed.

Thawing will bring you back to physiological functioning—if you survive the thaw, that is. Then the observations begin again. You are not given a name. No one speaks to you. You may undergo any number of tests, but there is a limit on them. They will only be performed up to a total of 14 days from the start of your life (not counting freezer time). After that, you will no longer be fed a proper diet for your age. You will no longer be kept warm. You will be tossed into the red bag of human waste and discarded. At least, that is the situation as it now exists.

Pushing the Limit

In the United States, 14 days is a guideline for the maximum number of days one should use embryos as human research subjects. (In some other countries, the 14-day limit is the law.) Researchers can freely experiment on embryos for up to 14 days; after that, if they have not been destroyed in the process of the research, they will be disposed of as human waste. They will not be transferred to human wombs for gestation. After all, who would want an embryo that has been experimented upon? And who would be responsible for any disabilities the resulting child might suffer?

But the 14-day rule, as it is called, may be obsolete soon if some researchers get their way. The rule was put in place when embryos could not be grown in the lab much beyond the blastocyst stage—that is, beyond five to seven days. Now scientists have the capability to support embryos in the lab for more than 14 days. And some researchers want to peer into older embryos to see what has heretofore been hidden in the womb. That means the guideline or rule will have to be changed—so that scientists will not be charged with breaking the law, and so they can solicit funding from taxpayers via the government.

In September 2017, there were an estimated one million frozen embryos in the United States alone.² Not all of them are research embryos, but we should not deceive ourselves into thinking that all or even most of those embryos will be transferred into wombs and brought to term. If the 14-day rule is struck down, and the time limit for research is expanded, many more vulnerable human embryos will languish in the freezer, or be expended in experimentation, only to end up in a red disposal bag.

Is this what civilization looks like?

Notes

1. Southern California Reproductive Center: scrcivf.com/treatment-options/embryo-freezing.
2. *Elle* (Sept. 29, 2017): elle.com/culture/a12445676/the-leftover-embryo-crisis.

D. Joy Riley D. Joy Riley is Executive Director of the Tennessee Center for Bioethics & Culture (www.tennesseecbc.org).

This article originally appeared in *Salvo*, Issue #51, Winter 2019

Copyright © 2019 *Salvo* | www.salvomag.com

<https://salvomag.com/article/salvo51/14-days-to-live>