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Ethics of IVF provision for lesbians raised in Stormont debate by Jim Allister MLA.

Below is a speech by TUV leader Jim Allister during this morning's (March 20th, 2012) debate on IVF:

"I had not intended to speak in this debate, but having listened to it, I find that there are issues that need to be ventilated. The previous contributor told us that there is nothing controversial about this issue, but there are ethical issues that touch on it. All of us, of course, who have had the privilege of being parents, know the great joy of that and can understand the great disappointment of couples who desperately want to be parents and have not succeeded. Therefore, I am sure that all of us can empathise with finding solutions for their difficulties, and there is nothing wrong in that.

"However, there are three tangential issues that touch on the matter and give me some questioning concern. The first pertains to the fact that, ultimately, as part of the process, there is destruction of unused embryos. A human embryo is, biologically, a living human being at the earliest stage of its development. Of course, it is dependent on the mother to nurture it and give it life, but, genetically, it is a distinct organism, different from both the egg and the sperm from which it grew. It does, in effect, need nothing more than the nourishment of the mother to grow into a recognisable human being. That is a point on which those who might take a religious perspective and those who might take a purely scientific perspective can probably agree. We have an arrangement where, ultimately, some embryos are destroyed. There is an ethical issue.

"The second issue that I have concerns about is the development of processes, particularly in the United States, for sex selection in IVF treatment. Perhaps the Minister can tell us how far, if at all, that is permitted in Northern Ireland's arrangements.

"The third issue that concerns me — it is not referred to in the NICE guidelines from what I can see — is the question of the use or abuse of IVF treatment by lesbian couples. There was a case in Scotland just a couple of years ago in which a lesbian couple challenged the health service's refusal to afford them IVF treatment. They got the backing of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and public money to do it, and they were preparing to take themselves into court on the issue when the health service backed down.

"So I would like to hear from the Health Minister what the position is in Northern Ireland on that. Is IVF treatment available to lesbian couples, who can, as it were, be treated equally under legislation with other, regular couples desperate to have a child?

"Therefore, when someone says that there is nothing controversial and nothing touching upon ethical issues about this, that is a naive misconception. There are ethical issues that need to be addressed. Of course we all want to help as many childless couples as we can, but we cannot stampede through the ethics of the matter with no regard to what is right. With those few thoughts, I conclude my remarks."

In response to the issues raised by Mr Allister the Health Minister Edwin Poots said:

"Mr Allister raised the issue of same-sex couples. IVF treatment is available to all couples who meet the criteria in Northern Ireland, as set out by previous guidelines."

Mr Poots later clarified that this situation arose in 2009.

Commenting after the debate Mr Allister said:

"I find it surprising that this change could have come about in 2009 without anyone apparently noticing much less seeking to resist it. During the debate Jim Wells complained that the Assembly had not been made aware of the changes and if it had been there would have been opposition.



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"But this raises a serious question for the DUP: Were those who are supposedly exercised about this issue asleep at the wheel? Why didn't the DUP members of the Health Committee flag up the issue back in 2009?"

"I believe that the traditional family unit is the best environment in which to raise children and I will be exploring this issue further with the Minister by way of written questions".