

Platform

The question of whether an embryo is a pile of cells or a person is up for debate at a film festival, says **Calum MacKellar**



Is the human embryo just a pile of cells or is it a person like any other human being who has been born? What are the ethical consequences of each position for society? Will a consensus on this issue ever be reached?

These are some of the questions which will be addressed at the tenth International Biomedical Ethics Film Festival taking place in Edinburgh at the end of the week.

They also concern very sensitive and difficult issues regulated by the Abortion Act 1967, which legalised abortion in England, Wales and Scotland by registered doctors who provide such medical practices through the National Health Service.

The termination of pregnancies remains a very controversial issue and has even become somewhat taboo in many polite discussions. This may be because of its extremely contentious nature for all concerned. Conflicts of interest exist amongst all involved as portrayed by the 2007 Romanian film entitled *Four months, Three weeks and Two days* which won the Palme d'Or Award at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. It tells the story of a poor college student who has become pregnant in 1987 communist Romania. After much hesitation, she finally decides to have an illegal abortion and engages an abusive doctor to perform the operation.

But the topic of the moral status of the human embryo is not just relevant to the very difficult topic of abortion. In the UK, hundreds of embryos are stored every year in freezers for destructive biomedical research.

Again ethical dilemmas arise as portrayed by the film entitled *Conversations: Ethics, Science, Stem Cells* where a discussion takes place between doctors, scientists, ethicists, theologians and a patient. It is a discussion that goes to the very heart of the questions "What is the definition of a person and when does personhood begin?" as well as "What justifies research?"

From even this brief survey, it should be evident that the topic of the moral status of the human embryo continues to raise a mountain of important ethical dilemmas. It is vital that Scottish society carries on to discuss these important issues and that it has different non-threatening settings to do so.

The 2014 Film Festival on the Moral Status of the Embryo, which is the first film festival of its kind in the world, aims to do just that. It will be offering challenging films and engaging discussions this weekend at the Edinburgh Filmhouse. At the end of each screening, a discussion will take place between the audience and a panel of experts in bioethics, law, philosophy and politics.

For more information see www.filmhousecinema.com/seasons/biomedical-ethics-film-festival-the-moral-status-of-the-embryo.

■ *Dr Calum MacKellar is director of research at the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics*