

# TOP BIOETHICS NEWS STORIES: MARCH 2018–MAY 2018

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**“Egg Freezing Industry Reeling after Two Major Malfunctions”** by Jane Weaver, *NBC News*, March 12, 2018

After two fertility clinics in different parts of the country experienced “major failures” at the same time, there are growing questions about the level of oversight at egg-freezing facilities. On Monday [March 12, 2018], the industry group that inspects most fertility labs told NBC News that there’s no requirement for a clinic to report problems unless there is a complaint filed or a negative news media report. (<https://tinyurl.com/yclnr4os>)

**“Can Lost Embryos Give Rise to a Wrongful Death Suit?”** by Sarah Zhang, *The Atlantic*, April 5, 2018

If—and that’s a big if—an embryo is deemed a person, then it could very well alter the practices of in-vitro fertilization clinics, which routinely create more embryos than are implanted into patients. And it will almost certainly alter the landscape of abortion politics. (<https://tinyurl.com/y8zcq6bq>)

In March, at two separate fertility clinics across the country, malfunctioning freezers resulted in the death of over 4,000 cryopreserved embryos. Neither clinic had undergone a safety inspection recently. Now, some families want to sue for wrongful death, but in order to do so, the embryos would have to be deemed persons. This would have profound implications for IVF practices as well as abortion laws.

**“Self-Driving Uber Car Kills Arizona Woman Crossing Street”** by Sydney Maki and Alexandria Sage, *Reuters*, March 19, 2018

An Uber self-driving car hit and killed a woman crossing the street in Arizona, police said on Monday, marking the first fatality involving an autonomous vehicle and a potential

blow to the technology expected to transform transportation. The ride services company said it was suspending North American tests of its self-driving vehicles, which are currently going on in Arizona, Pittsburgh and Toronto. (<https://tinyurl.com/yaq2wynd>)

A 49-year-old woman was hit by a car in autonomous mode while walking her bike outside of the designated crosswalk on a four-lane road. Much of the current ethical debate surrounding autonomous vehicles involves safety considerations, as well as liability concerns regarding who will be responsible when a vehicle makes a fatal decision and whether autonomous vehicles can account for unpredictable human behavior. Even though video evidence indicated that the accident may not have been avoidable, critics are concerned that Arizona lacks sufficient regulation for autonomous vehicles.

**“The Controversial Study of a Girl Who Ufologists Called ‘Alien’”** by Sarah Zhang, *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2018

In 2003, a local man who regularly scavenged La Noria [Chile] for historical trinkets found [the tiny] body of a girl. . . .

This redemptive scientific narrative took shape, only to be punctured by a sharply critical editorial in *El Mercurio*, a Chilean science website. Cristina Dorador condemned the DNA analysis as unethical given the origins of the girl’s body. “If samples are obtained unethically, any resulting science is not ethical, and as such, should not be published,” she wrote. Then, the gut punch: “Would these authors be happy working on the body of a surreptitiously buried child from Boston, MA or Santa Barbara, CA? Or are the ethics of working on children from less-developed nations less complicated?” (<https://tinyurl.com/y7ynkgog>)

An area of bioethics that has received more attention is the last few years is research

on indigenous populations in the majority world. Past abuses and spurious ethical guidelines have caused many people to be wary of scientists from resource-rich nations. The case of the female baby corpse in Chile is one example of research that was done on a corpse that likely was obtained illegally. This also brings up ethical questions about the proper treatment of human remains among other dignity considerations.

**“Time’s Running Out: The Frail in Puerto Rico Face End of Hurricane Relief Programs”** by Sarah Varney, *Kaiser Health News*, March 30, 2018

Six months after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and its economy—and killing by some estimates at least 1,052 people—the daily indignities are piling up, especially for people who are frail or elderly. Many are finding their current economic straits nearly as threatening as the storm. The storm also crippled the island’s power grid, and as of Sunday 86,000 utility customers still had no electricity in their homes and businesses, affecting hundreds of thousands of people. (<https://tinyurl.com/yacrzw53>)

Disaster ethics is an important area of bioethics because regions hit by natural disasters or affected by war experience a unique set of vulnerable circumstances, particularly when it comes to medical care. Beyond the tragedy of 3,000+ deaths, many people remain without electricity, and suicide rates reportedly increased 29% in 2017 as a result of the hurricane’s devastation. Furthermore, the article notes that as government aid has begun to wane as the recovery proceeds, Medicaid and other healthcare services are being overhauled and in some cases phased out.

**“Medically Assisted Suicide Becomes Legal in Hawaii”** by Sophia Yan, *U.S. News & World Report*, April 5, 2018

Hawaii became the latest liberal-leaning state to legalize medically assisted suicide Thursday as the governor signed a measure into law allowing doctors to fulfill requests from terminally ill patients to prescribe life-ending medication. (<https://tinyurl.com/y72vbhcr>)

In the United States, Hawaii became the 6<sup>th</sup> state (plus the District of Columbia) to legalize physician-assisted suicide. Last year, the law was passed in the Senate but was tabled in the state’s House. Some reports link an assisted suicide law to an increase in non-medical suicides. Hawaii has the highest rate in the U.S. of suicides for youth 10–24 years old.

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**“Pioneering Psychologist Hans Asperger Was a Nazi Sympathizer Who Sent Children to Be Killed, New Evidence Suggests”** by George Dvorsky, *Gizmodo*, April 19, 2018

The term ‘Asperger’s syndrome’ will never be heard the same way again, owing to new research showing that Hans Asperger—the Austrian pediatrician for whom the disorder was named—was an active participant in the Nazi eugenics program, recommending that patients deemed “not fit for life” be sent to a notorious children’s “euthanasia” clinic. New research published today in the science journal *Molecular Autism* shows that Asperger wasn’t the man he led the public to believe he was. (<https://tinyurl.com/y86f92nc>)

Every student of bioethics understands World War II as an example of a profound breach in medical ethics by doctors working in Nazi Germany. New research by medical historian Herwig Czech shows that Hans Asperger was a Nazi sympathizer who referred disabled children to a pediatric clinic in Vienna that performed eugenic killings. Between 1940 and 1945 over 800 children were killed at this clinic.

**“Dutch Probe ‘Appalling’ Euthanasia of Dementia Patient”** by Maria Cheng, *Medical Xpress*, April 20, 2018

In a rare series of moves, Dutch authorities are investigating whether doctors may have committed crimes in five euthanasia cases, including the deaths of two women with advanced Alzheimer’s disease. In one of the Alzheimer’s cases, which prosecutors began probing in September, a physician drugged the patient’s coffee without her knowledge and then had the woman physically restrained while delivering the fatal injection. (<https://tinyurl.com/y9sl8hf9>)

For the first time since euthanasia was legalized in The Netherlands, Dutch authorities conducted a criminal investigation into a doctor who drugged a dementia patient without her knowledge. It was reported that the doctor had the woman physically restrained by her family as he injected her with lethal drugs. Even though the patient had previously said she wanted euthanasia “when the time was right,” when subsequently asked, she said on several occasions, “But not just now, it’s not so bad yet!”

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**“The Life and Death of Alfie Evans Highlights the Gap between the U.S. and Europe on Right to Life”** by Annabelle Timsit, *Quartz*, April 28, 2018

A baby boy named Alfie Evans died early this morning at the Alder Hey Children’s Hospital in Liverpool, England, in the pediatric intensive care unit that had been his home for the last 18 months. The life he lived for close to 24 months was mercilessly short, yet full of meaning. He didn’t know it, but he was at the center of a heart-wrenching debate about who should have final authority over children’s medical care: Parents, or the state? (<https://tinyurl.com/y7cfhqm8>)

Alfie Evans was a terminally ill British baby whose parents wanted to explore options for his care, but the hospital deemed his case futile. The hospital petitioned the British High Court to take Alfie Evans off of life support, but the parents objected, seeking permission to take him to Italy for treatment.

At every stage of the legal proceedings, courts ruled in favor of the hospital based on protecting the best interest of the child. The situation provoked backlash from religious groups, including the Vatican, and from people in the U.S., where laws tend to favor parental authority in medical decisions on behalf of their children.

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**“Miracle Cures or Modern Quackery? Stem Cell Clinics Multiply, with Heartbreaking Results for Some Patients.”** By Laurie McGinley and William Wan, *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2018

Hidden in that fat were stem cells with the amazing power to heal, the Stem Cell Center of Georgia had told Tyler. The clinic is one of hundreds that have popped up across the country, many offering treatments for conditions from Parkinson’s disease to autism to multiple sclerosis. Federal regulators have not approved any of their treatments, and critics call such clinics modern-day snake-oil salesmen. But on that day in 2016, Tyler trusted the clinic to extract stem cells from her fat and inject them into her eyes, where she was told they could halt or even cure the macular degeneration threatening her sight. Within months, she was completely blind. (<https://tinyurl.com/y7qwaqy5>)

At the time of the *Washington Post* article, there were over 700 stem cell clinics open in the U.S., most of which touted treatments that were not FDA approved. These clinics argue that they are not administering a drug and, therefore, are not subject to FDA regulations. Furthermore, they claim that patients have a right to alternative medicine. However, some patients have experienced adverse effects from these alternative therapies, and many have not seen the results they were promised. The FDA has since cracked down on stem cell clinics, outlining standards for practice.

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