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NORD Issues Gene Patenting Statement

Valerie Gutmann Koch

IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, valeriegutmannkoch@gmail.com

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GENETIC SCREENING FOR ABNORMAL EMBRYOS
The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), the body that regulates in vitro fertilization (IVF) in the UK, has agreed in principle to allow embryos to be screened for an abnormal number of chromosomes. The technique called aneuploidy can screen out embryos that are aneuploid (contain more or less than 46 chromosomes). Embryos that contain an abnormal number of chromosomes usually result in a failure to implant in the womb that can lead to miscarriage. For such reasons, HFEA contends that aneuploidy screening would be of particular benefit to women who have suffered repeated miscarriages or unsuccessful IVF. Additionally, the screening would also likely increase the success rate of IVF by eliminating embryos that have little chance of implanting in the womb.

A fertilization clinic in London and another in Nottingham have applied for licenses to conduct aneuploidy screening. A spokesman for HFEA stated that “any such license would be subject to satisfactory inspection of the intended laboratories; approval of clinic staff; the provision of detailed technical and patient information; and ongoing monitoring.” HFEA recognizes that although the technique is used in a number of fertilization clinics around the world, it is still in its early stages of utilization and needs to be overseen.

Paul Scriven, a principal scientist at Guy’s and St. Thomas’s Hospitals NHS Trust in London, said that with present aneuploidy testing methods, “it is too easy to misdiagnose a normal embryo as abnormal and therefore not attempt to transfer it into the womb.” Other opponents of the screening are concerned that it is another step toward designing a “perfect” baby. Richard Nicholson, editor of the Bulletin of Medical Ethics, said that, “it is important to realize that the same technique has been used to screen out other abnormalities like Down’s and Turner’s syndrome.” Until now, fertility specialists in the UK have only been permitted to screen for specific genetic disorders. However, aneuploidy screening can detect a whole range of genetic abnormalities, leading some to worry about in-