

## Psst.. want to sell your ova?

***The Human Bodyshop: The Engineering and Marketing of Life. Andrew Kimbrell. Third World Network. Penang, Malaysia. 1993, 348***

**It** is important for all of us — whether medical professionals, patients or other interested parties — to be aware of the intimate relation between medical innovations, the environment in which they develop, and their consequences, economic or otherwise. Without this recognition, it is easy to view each medical step as unnatural and evil (“it is against God and nature”) or an unadulterated good (“it gives people more choices”).

Andrew Kimbrell argues that developments in medical and scientific research have led to the commodification of body parts. His “tour” of the “human body shop” covers the “sale and manipulation of blood, organs and fetal parts... the marketing of human reproductive materials and . . . the new biotechnology business of selling and engineering human biochemicals, genes and cells.”

For example, once the blood transfusion system developed in the 1940s, it was only a matter of time before commercial blood banks came along, stocked by homeless men, alcoholics, drug addicts driven to sell their blood to eat, drink or smoke — and an attempt to develop voluntary donation was attacked as a conspiracy to hamper a legitimate economic activity. Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza depended partly on forcible ‘donations’ from political prisoners to stock his commercial blood bank — which was licensed by the US FDA, and exported its stock to the US and Europe.

***The Human Body Shop*** makes pretty smooth reading, at least partly due to the writer’s ability to pick up

extraordinary stories. Like Margaret Cramer Green who made a living selling her plasma to a commercial blood laboratory — claimed \$2,355 in business deductions — to pay for travel expenses, drugs, medical insurance and a special diet. She was challenged by the internal revenue service, but the court ruled, among other things, that Mrs Green was... the container in which her product was transported to the market.”

When describing the manner in which transplant technology led to an international racket in organs from the poor, the author argues that the technology was also responsible for the shift to the brain death. (In fact, the Indian Organ Transplant Act, 1994, specifically applies the concept of brain death only for brain-dead organ donors.) What are the implications of death being defined according to the need for transplantable organs? Some

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**“Do you have lupus or have you recently recovered from a major illness? If so, **your** plasma could make a valuable contribution to the medical industry and earn \$\$\$ at the same **time**”**

*Advertisement in a weekly paper in San Francisco, USA*

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American states are considering legislation to declare anencephalic newborns dead at birth, to use their organs for transplant.

The author moves through a gamut of practices: from blood transfusion, organ transplants, foetal tissue collected from abortion clinics for research, and the extreme commodification of reproduction in infertility treatments (“Surrogate mother needed to legally carry infertile couple’s child. \$10,000 and expenses

paid.”), to preimplantational eugenics, gene technology, transgenic animals, patenting life, cloning.

The future? “The body shop future vision permits the sale of organs and fetal parts, subcontracts out having a baby, creates a breeder class to sell tissues, organs and reproductive elements, and allows us to change the definition of life and death to suit the requirements of body parts demand.” In response, Kimbrell calls for a list of specific ‘biopolicies’, speaking from the “empathetic body version of the future” which “focuses on a sacred image of the human form... has an appreciation and awe for the diversity of all human and other life-forms... and places an emphasis on preventive medicine and more sustainable lifestyles.”

However, Kimbrell’s own opinions seem to be linked to other commitments: among which are opposition to abortion and of euthanasia. He would have done better to spell out his commitments, and justify them. He is described as the policy director of the Foundation for Economic Trends, though we are not told what this organisation does.

There seem to be a number of inaccuracies or exaggerations in the text, partly because Kimbrell relies heavily on newspaper reports, giving more credence to such reports than would the press itself. Though he is described as a lawyer, his writing lacks the careful statements expected of a lawyer. There are also a number of outdated statements: since 1993, India has a law on transplants, and cloning technology has advanced considerably.

I do not recommend this book for the point of view expressed by the author. However, the extreme statements and examples in the book encourage readers to examine such issues carefully. The book serves a purpose — perhaps not that of the author — if it stimulates honest thought on the technologies of our time.

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