Press Release: 10 November 2015
This House Would Design Its Own Baby

“I urge you to vote for a future free of genetic disease and ugly mathematicians”

Proposition: Professor Robin Lovell-Badge
There is new technology to alter our genes, Professor Robin begins. New techniques would be used to avoid having children with genetic diseases. You can also use it to deal with the risk of having a disease, or even ways in which to improve our muscles or make us run faster. There are many things we do not understand, he says, but eventually we will understand enough about genetics to make great advances. Professor Robin finishes by noting the importance of debating and discussing these questions.

Opposition: Professor Shirley Hodgson
Hodgson responds to Lovell-Badge by point out that you would have to deal with quite a lot of genes if you would want to actually get rid of breast cancer, for example. The idea of having children with desirable characteristics is a discussion that has been going on for a long time. But such discussions, she notes, have led to the practices of Nazi Germany. Also, in order to be successful, you need not just intelligence, but the drive and personality to achieve it. A further issue is that the child has not consented to these changes. Moreover, she argues, the changes are inheritable and if the child has a correction that “does not work very well” then their child will have it also.

Proposition: Tom Whipple
Whipple switches the question around by asking whether it is more immoral not to genetically engineer a child. Over the next century, we will be able to get rid of genetic diseases. “I urge you to vote for a future free of genetic disease and ugly mathematicians”.

Opposition: Dr Hilary Burton
We should not publically fund these services. The rich will be the ones who create these designer babies, Burton suggests. It would also be hard to regulate and asks which traits could be acceptable or not. On a personal note, Burton notes that she would of course want her children to be perfect, but the “sheer pain complexity” of genetic engineering seems “ludicrous”. From a population perspective, it is impractical. As a parent, she ensures the chamber that there are better and more fun ways to getting pregnant and having babies then through designer babies.

Proposition: Dr Dagan Wells
This debate is taking place in a society where genetics have been given a bad press and has been viewed negatively, says Wells. He says that we need not worry that genetically engineering will affect all of the contentious issues that have previously been discussed all of a sudden. These are many shades of greys in this issue and we are not taking about things unless there is a “real imperative” to avoid problems in the future. Is there not an ethical imperative, he argues, to help out if somebody is in great pain? He finishes by pointing out that we should not ignore the ‘human side’ of this debate and the difficult questions that parents must answer for.

Opposition: Dr Julian Huppert
He argues that by ‘design’ we mean the blue eyes, the hair colour or intelligence. We are heading horribly towards the ‘ubermensch’ idea – there is an issue of equity here, he argues. A problem therefore is that we will have an issue of the ‘improved’ child and the ‘non-improved’ child decided from birth. He concludes be noting how we can indeed design our own babies, at some later stage at least, but the answer to whether we should is should be given a negative response.

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For footage of the event go to https://www.youtube.com/user/cambridgeunionsoc