



Countering Catholic Misinformation About Vaccines

"But Catholics have to be on guard against anti-science prophets, no matter how well meaning, and the false witness they bear."



A priest recently mentioned to me that he was not planning to get the COVID-19 vaccine. He told me he was concerned that RNA vaccines could alter our DNA and he heard there were also risks to fertility.

I replied that those particular concerns were unsubstantiated, and not scientifically correct, and encouraged him to be vigilant about various forms of misinformation, including "Catholic" misinformation that can spread rapidly on social media.

In a [January 2021 article](#) in *Crisis Magazine*, for example, Anna-Maria Cardinalli repeats several errors regarding a cell line widely used in vaccine production and research. Her comments appear to be based on a problematic [LifeSite News interview](#) by John Henry Westen with former graduate student Pamela Acker:

Acker speaks about her research into the HEK-293 cell line specifically, and talks about the number that's at the end of that cell line name. 'HEK' stands for Human Embryonic Kidney and the '293' actually reveals the number of experiments that a specific researcher did to develop that cell line. 'It doesn't mean there

were two hundred and ninety-three abortions, but for two hundred and ninety-three experiments, you would certainly need far more than one abortion. We're talking probably hundreds of abortions,' Acker shares."

In reality, the HEK 293 cell line was obtained from a single fetus, and only one abortion occurred, not hundreds. Cells were removed from the kidney, modified, and grown subsequently for many years in the laboratory of Alex van der Eb in Leiden, the Netherlands. This cell line, generated in 1972 or 1973, underwent many "passages" and purification steps, leading to the number "293."

Whether there were hundreds of abortions or just one is not the key issue, since harvesting cells from even a single abortion is still unethical. However, in Acker's interview, the sense of outrage for the audience is ramped up in proportion to the overstated claims about the number of abortions. This phenomenon is understandable, since there are some Catholics who do not seem to grasp the problem with abortion-derived cell lines at all,

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or minimize it, which can generate frustration among others who may be tempted to overstate their case.

When Catholics disseminate incorrect medical, scientific or factual information in their discussions, or subscribe to urban legends and conspiracy theories, it raises serious concerns. Some of this scientific fake news comes from those who are generally opposed to vaccinations and perhaps more gullible when it comes to false scientific claims. We face a particular obligation to get our facts straight because “the establishment” will fact-check us very strictly even as it allows certain liberal distortions of truth to pass unchallenged, particularly when it serves the narrative that the Church is “anti-science.” In terms of COVID-19 vaccines, we spend a fair amount of time at *The National Catholic Bioethics Center* countering “Catholic” misinformation and/or disinformation about cell line usage from abortions, whether from those who believe one can never get vaccinated, or from those at the other end of the spectrum who believe there is no moral problem at all with the continued use of these cell lines in research.

Cardinalli also offers the claim that the HEK-293 cell line was ob-

tained from a living baby because once a child dies, the cells are basically no longer useful:

HEK stands for human embryonic kidney. To harvest a viable embryonic kidney for this purpose, sufficiently healthy children old enough to have adequately-developed kidneys must be removed from the womb, alive, typically by cesarean section, and have their kidneys cut out. This must take place without anesthesia for the child, which would lessen the viability of the organs.”

These claims are not correct, and there is no historical evidence that a C-section was ever done to obtain the HEK-293 cell line. Rather, procurement of the kidneys relied on standard abortion techniques. It is also noteworthy that extracted kidneys can survive and even function for many minutes following the death of an individual — that is how cadaveric kidney transplantation between adults originally took place — and cells can be successfully derived from kidneys quite some time after their removal from the body.

The best response to these

forms of misinformation from well-intentioned Catholics is to provide accurate guidance and scientific explanations to our Catholic faithful, hoping they will have ears to hear and hearts open to dialogue and reflection when presented with factually correct information.

None of this is to reduce the obligation we have to object strongly to the continued use of abortion-derived cells in vaccine work and other forms of research, as I have emphasized in several recent essays available at ncbcenter.org and fathertad.com.

But Catholics have to be on guard against anti-science prophets, no matter how well meaning, and the false witness they bear. We should give witness to the truth in all its forms, including in the important and highly influential worlds of science and medicine.

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