

A (Real) Handmaid's Tale

Whether you are pro-this or anti-that, a passionate believer in human dignity, or an ultra-rational utilitarian, your bioethics always has to begin with the facts. While knowledge of consequences is only part of ethical decision-making, it is an essential part.

Surrogacy is one issue in which the public gets only a very partial vision of the consequences. Normally the media focuses on the joy of the commissioning parents, while the surrogate mother remains anonymous and her story untold. The surrogate mothers have been excluded from the glitzy ménage of Elton John and David Furnish and their two children, for instance.

But a surrogate's life after giving birth is part of the consequences as well.

Nowhere was this more marked than in India, where some clinics had dormitories for surrogate mothers in varying stages of pregnancy. The clinics assured Western journalists that the women were happy and detached. And since there was an almost impenetrable language barrier between the journalists and the women, it was practically impossible to check these bland reassurances. Now India has closed the door to international surrogacy, so these stories have faded away.

But around the world surrogacy is increasing, not decreasing, as older women and gay couples try to have children. With the doors closed in India, Thailand and Cambodia, agencies are recruiting women in Ukraine and Georgia. Because commercial surrogacy is legal in the United States, surrogacy agencies which offer medical, counselling, and legal services are marketing to clients from around the world.

However, the recent death of a surrogate mother in the state of Kentucky unveiled hazards which exist even in the world's richest nation.

For a brief moment in 2002, 23-year-old Brooke Verity was probably the world's most famous surrogate mother. She had just given birth to quadruplets to a gay couple.

The four children, who now live in California, turn 15 in July. But Brooke won't be celebrating with them. She died suddenly in November of chronic drug abuse at the ripe old age of 37. It is a sad story and it helps to explain why Harvard women normally prefer careers in investment banking to careers in surrogacy.

When Brooke was 4, her parents divorced. After a year with her mother, she moved in with her father. She became pregnant at 17, had a son, married the father, had twins, and then divorced.

A couple of years later, her hairdresser, Thomas Dysarz, and his partner, Michael Meehan, asked her if she would be interested in becoming a surrogate mother. She signed a contract to bear a child for each of them. She surrendered her parental rights as the biological mother and even agreed to foetal reduction, if necessary – and all she received in return was a tummy tuck.

After IVF with Meehan's sperm, Brooke became pregnant with five babies. She and Meehan agreed to "reduce" (kill and abort) one of them. Dysarz disagreed but only four babies were born, prematurely, on July 26, 2002.

And from there Brooke's life started to go downhill.

She suffered from post-natal depression. Perhaps the men did, too. Dysarz broke up with Meehan, alleging abuse. Dysarz was denied visitation rights and Meehan got custody of the quadruplets. To escape Dysarz, Meehan moved back to California.