

July 28, 1997

TELEVISION REVIEW

**Moral Questions Amid Medical Answers**

By WALTER GOODMAN

''Making Babies'' does well what television does best. Tonight's first hour of a three-part series treats the nervous-making subject of genetic manipulation through two couples in painful situations. Sensitive, precise, thoughtful, ''Genetically Correct'' captures their desperation and determination, explains the latest techniques for weeding out killer genes and looks into the promise and threat of the continuing experiments.

Jack, the baby son of Ann and Albert Freedman, is dying of spinal muscular atrophy, a disease caused by an inherited gene. The Freedmans would do anything to have another child, but given the risks that natural conception will again produce a fatally ill baby, they resort to the laboratory. The camera focuses on a team at the National Institutes for Health trying to make sure that only embryos free of the disease are transferred to Mrs. Freedman's womb. In a model of science reporting by television, you can see the embryos being poked into place.

The second case raises harder issues. Jack and Lisa Nash's baby, 2-year-old Molly, will die of Fanconi anemia by the time she is 8 if she does not get a bone-marrow replacement. So Mrs. Nash risks a course of ''maximum hormone stimulation'' that will permit her to produce many eggs for fertilization by her husband's sperm. From the resulting embryos, two are selected that are healthy and have marrow that is identical to Molly's. The hope is that marrow from the new baby will save Molly's life.

This effort raises the specter, deeply troubling for students of ethics, of a new life being created to be used for someone else's benefit. And both cases, as the narrator points out, may foreshadow ''designer babies.''

One optimistic doctor likens genetic research to the research of automobile engineers bent on making safer cars; he envisions parents being able to make sure their prospective children will not die of cancer or heart disease. Others foresee a time when parents will not only be able to produce babies that are guaranteed to be free of certain ailments but also to have the preferred sex, eye color, height and much else.

Already such prophecies, hopeful yet disquieting, have confronted legislators with the question of whether Federal or state money should be used for genetic research.