

Questions you should ask yourself before getting cryogenically frozen

November 22 2016, by Simon Woods



Would you want to wake up in the future? Credit: Veronika Surovtseva/Shutterstock

A dying 14-year-old child recently [won the right to be cryogenically frozen](#) after her death following a UK court battle. In a letter to the

judge, the child wrote: "I think being cryo-preserved gives me a chance to be cured and woken up, even in hundreds of years' time. I don't want to be buried underground ... I want to live and live longer and I think that in the future they might find a cure for my cancer and wake me up."

The [premature death](#) of a young person is a particular tragedy and one cannot but be moved by the letter. [According to newspaper reports](#), several children, some as young as seven, have also signed up to be frozen after their deaths.

Accurate figures of how many people have been cryogenically preserved are difficult to obtain because there is no system of recording this information. There are probably several hundred in the US and Russia where facilities are known to exist. There are no laws which ban the practice outright but there may be legal difficulties for cryonics because most countries specify how a dead body must be disposed of – and exclude long-term storage of this kind.

But what are the deeper moral and ethical issues of allowing the practice? And what would the consequences be if cryopreservation became mainstream?

Cryonics [is a process of deep cooling the body](#) with the aim of preserving the tissues at very low temperatures. In effect, it is a form of cold mummification. People who turn to cryogenics are usually captivated by the possibility of having their body preserved until some indeterminate future time when it is imagined that science and technology will be capable of curing any cause of death, repairing damaged tissues and, most importantly, bringing them back to life.

But is such a thing plausible? Human and other [animal tissues](#) can of course be preserved. The corpses of mammoths, preserved in the permafrost, [have been shown](#) to have viable fragments of DNA after

thousands of years. More to the point, human sperm and embryos can also be preserved for several years and still retain the capacity for life. Although most scientists are extremely sceptical about the possibility of ever reanimating a corpse that has been cryogenically frozen, it only takes one person claiming "never-say-never" to inspire some individuals to latch on to a promissory future featuring a techno-science fix for human mortality.

The existential tussle with human mortality has been a feature of culture for as long as thoughts have been recordable in art or the written word. People turned to religion in the hope of resurrection and immortality in the same way that some are now turning to science. When the Roman philosopher Epicurus [tried to persuade us that](#) "death should be nothing to us" he failed to assuage the deep human anxiety in the face of mortality.



Sperm samples in a cryopreservation container at -170C. Credit: DPA/EPA

Frozen futures

So, given that it is so natural for humans to seek immortality, is cryopreservation, purchased by well-informed individuals who have the personal wealth to afford it, really wrong? Looked at from this perspective one could say that it is merely an expression of a libertarian freedom which tolerates the spending of personal resources on wasteful luxuries – although many might regard this as inherently unfair and claim that access to these services should be made more equitable, perhaps even provided as part of routine healthcare.

The problem with the current debate is that advocates of cryonics combine science fiction with science fact which, for some, amounts to a persuasive hype. But for such claims to be sustained, there needs to be much stronger evidence that restoration following cryogenics was more than a fantasy.

And there are even more profound issues than this. Cryonics, after all, has the potential to be deeply exploitative of those at an especially vulnerable time in their lives, in particular those facing the premature death of a young family member. Although companies offering the service are at one level candid about the procedure, [they also subtly promise more](#). The language used in their advertising is that of medical care, the deceased is referred to as a "patient" and the procedure described as a boundary-breaking treatment extending into the future. This certainly has the potential to offer false hope.

The legal status of such organisations is untested in the UK, but it is unlikely that they would conform [to the requirements](#) of the Human Tissue Act 2004. More specific regulation may force such organisations to be more candid in their literature and less likely to prey on the vulnerable.

There is also the question about resources. Isn't it a form of hubris to say to future generations that "you should devote your resources to saving and restoring me". What reason would future generations have for treating me as a patient rather than a curiosity – a strange ice-mummy from the 21st century? What's more, the world's population is expanding rapidly. Sending our dead into the future would only add to that. So, if this technique were to ever work, perhaps a condition of future resurrection should be an agreement not to reproduce during one's current lifetime as a trade-off against a growing population.

If it could work then cryogenics might be construed as a caring option particularly in the light of a dying child's plea. However, what form of care would it be to send a child, alone, into some indeterminate future – no family, no friends, no resources? It is in circumstances like these that [the words of Dylan Thomas](#) are often quoted as a defiant response to death: "Do not go gentle into that good night." But on reflection, cryogenics is a misguided way to "rage against the dying of the light."

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