

Euphenics Encyclopedia Article

Euphenics

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Euphenics

The term euphenics was coined in the early 1960s as an alternative or counterpart to the word eugenics. Euphenics means specifically intervention in human development at the molecular and cellular level. The term has been used to refer to treatment of genetic diseases.

The first time the term euphenics was used in print was in a 1963 article in the British journal *Nature* by Joshua Lederberg, who won the Nobel prize in medicine in 1958. It appeared sporadically in several other British journals thereafter. Judging from its absence from the indices of many genetics and molecular biology textbooks, euphenics was still not a term in wide use by the late 1990s. However, as genetic testing and genetic engineering advanced sometimes startlingly in their capabilities, debate over their ethical use intensified.

"Eugenics" was already freighted with such negative associations that the need for a different term was clear. After World War II, when the Nazis' horrific eugenics program was revealed to the rest of the world, eugenics essentially dropped out of scientific vocabulary. For example the American Eugenics Society became the Society for the Study of Social Biology. As eugenics was strongly associated with racism, euthanasia, genocide, and forced sterilization, scientists lacked a suitable term to denote some of their work on human genetics. The 1990s saw even more of the human genetic code uncovered. Genetic testing had grown so sophisticated that couples known as carriers of genetic abnormalities, Tay-Sachs disease for example, could have their eight-cell *in vitro* embryos tested before implantation. The Human Genome Project, begun in 1990, intensified the speed of new genetic discoveries, and sparked ever fierier debate over the ethics of work in this area. Euphenics is thus a badly needed neutral term that allows scientists to discuss new genetic testing and treatments for genetic disease without invoking the heated response that "eugenics" engenders.