Why lab-grown meat is a good thing

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While the sight of someone eating a very expensive burger is clearly something of a publicity stunt, the underlying idea behind laboratory-grown meat is sound. The research is highly laudable, because what it promises is so desirable.

Meat-eating is morally problematic, and many people are – or think they should be – vegetarian as a result. For one thing, the welfare of the animals we eat is seen by many as a concern. Not only might it be problematic for some that an animal is killed for our benefit at all – but it's undeniable that the quality of life of many of those animals is abysmal. Carnivores often have blood on their hands in more than the literal sense.

For another, conventional meat-rearing is phenomenally environmentally destructive. It takes many kilos of grain and many litres of water to produce one kilo of beef. This pits hungry humans and cattle in direct competition, meaning that the cost of survival for the poorest is higher than it would be in a vegetarian world. But, in addition, all that livestock has to live somewhere, and this contributes to massive deforestation. And it's hard to forget the sheer amount of methane that ruminants produce.

Lab-grown meat offers to solve both these problems. Welfare concerns can be eliminated simply by virtue of there being no real animal to suffer and die. At the same time, the signs are that lab-grown meat would be much less resource-intensive. It would still probably not be as efficient a means of getting protein as vegetarianism, but it would

represent a great improvement.

Hence there is good reason to welcome the advent of lab-grown meat, and to hope for the day when it's in the supermarkets.

What about the arguments against lab-grown meat? There seems to be three. The first, and easiest to dismiss, is the "Frankenfoods" gambit – the idea that this process interferes with nature, and ought to be resisted for that reason. But all food production interferes with nature – wheat, for example, is the result of thousands of years of selective breeding, and is grown on land that has been systematically altered for the purpose. If you don't want food that's the product of interference with nature, you're probably going to be hungry.

The second is the cost argument. It might be that lab-grown meat turns out to be very expensive – too expensive to be viable. It's hard to prove this one way or the other at present. However, in other areas – for example, pharmaceutical research, or IT – the initially high price of a product can fall a long way very quickly: a drug that might have cost thousands of dollars a decade ago might now cost pennies. There's no reason to expect that a similar pattern wouldn't be seen here.

The third is the safety argument: that this meat may not be fit for human consumption, or have unforeseen and undesirable consequences for health. Yet there's no reason to expect that this would be the case – lab grown meat is meat, after all: it's not a product cooked up from chemicals in a bottle. It would be produced under controlled conditions, and it might even be possible to design it to be more healthy than conventional meat. While it would make sense to ensure that it's not unsafe, the meat produced would almost certainly have to pass safety tests much more stringent than would be faced by "natural" foodstuffs. For the time being, there is no obvious reason to be worried.

All around the world, demand for meat is increasing, and is probably unsustainable. At the same time, many carnivores are guilty carnivores: they know that meat-eating is problematic, but like it too much to give it up. Lab grown meat offers the chance of supplying the world with the food it wants, but with a minimised moral cost. That seems like a good thing all around.

Provided by University of Manchester

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