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Scientist's fraud won't sway fight in Florida

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For two years, Bernard Siegel had a front row seat to some of the latest developments in stem-cell research.

In 2004, Siegel, a lawyer by trade and stem-cell activist by passion, got a private tour of the stem-cell lab at Seoul National University in South Korea where Hwang Woo Suk experienced his meteoric rise to fame after claiming to have created patient-matched embryonic stem-cell lines in a paper published in the journal *Science*.

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He proffers photos of himself with the now-disgraced doctor and expresses "a real sense of betrayal" from the man who was forced last month to quit his post because the university where he conducted his pioneering stem-cell research now says it was faked.

The research "offered hope to everyone. To think this would be fabricated, it's a colossal deception," said Siegel, executive director of the Wellington-based Genetics Policy Institute, an organization that counts among its advisory board members some of the world's most prominent scientific, legal and ethical scholars.

Had Hwang's claims been true, it would have been a major breakthrough because creating stem cells genetically matched to a specific patient would be less likely to be rejected by patients' immune systems.

But a Seoul National University investigative panel concluded today that it was unable to find any evidence that Hwang's team actually made stem cells from cloned embryos. A South Korean newspaper reported that Hwang also admitted to the scientific fakery.

However, a majority of the investigative panel reportedly did find that the Afghan hound Hwang claims to have cloned is in fact the world's first cloned dog.

Siegel can't help but wonder how he and many others, including the American scientists Hwang invited to co-author his articles, were fooled.

"The whole world was taken in by Dr. Hwang. I was in awfully good company. Far more people who were knowledgeable in science than me were duped by him," said Siegel, whose organization awarded Hwang its 2005 Global Achievement Award in June, but revoked it last month.

"I like to call this a Greek tragedy of Korean proportions," Siegel said.

The inquiry into Hwang's alleged misconduct, one of the most explosive in recent scientific history, has provided scientists and ethicists with fertile ground for discussion and raises the question of complicity by the media, which produced an untold number of stories about Hwang's purported discoveries, not to mention the scientific journal that published his claims.

"The Korean government and (Hwang's) team worked hard to gain fame. There was a publicity engine cranked up and the media responded to it," said Louis Guenin, an ethics lecturer at Harvard University and the author of a stem-cell amendment in Florida providing for government funding of embryonic stem-cell research.

The Hwang discomfiture no doubt will gird anti-stem-cell activists as they prepare to take up arms against legislation in Florida and other states having to do with the highly controversial matter of whether human embryos should be used in scientific research that proponents believe could lead to cures for numerous disabilities and diseases, as well as whether government dollars should be



used to fund the research.

"Clearly the foes of stem-cell research have a target with this and that's one of the most disheartening things about it," said Siegel, who added that Hwang's alleged scientific misrepresentations have only fortified his organization's commitment.

Stakeholders outraged

In Florida, Sen. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton, and Rep. Franklin Sands, D-Weston, are co-sponsoring a bill that would provide \$15 million a year for 10 years in state seed money for embryonic and adult stem-cell research.

In addition, petition drives are under way to put two competing constitutional amendments on the ballot:

- One, sponsored by Palm Beach County Commissioner Burt Aaronson, calls for government funding of embryonic stem cell research.
- The other, sponsored by Boca Raton mortgage broker Susan Cutaia, opposes government funding.

"It's going to be used as a political football," predicts Eric Laywell, a professor in the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of Florida who also has served as an adviser to Cutaia.

"It's not so much what the politicians and scientists will say, but in people's minds, they will lose confidence in the promise of embryonic stem cells."

Opponents of embryonic stem-cell research argue that destroying a human embryo equates to destroying a life. A bill pending in Congress essentially would outlaw such research by sending any participating doctor, scientist, patient or parent to jail for 10 years and fine him \$1 million.

"The real problem is the taking of human life. Whether they are cheating over there (Korea) doesn't bear on the real problem of embryonic stem cell research," said Don Kazimir, director of the Respect Life Office of the Diocese of Palm Beach, who said Hwang's claims were simply over-hyped.

"It's indicative of human nature. He's a scientist and he needs to get money for his research and sometimes there is cheating," Kazimir said.

Although political extremists may make hay over this, using Hwang to debunk all stem-cell research is like "turning off the telescope if you find an astronomer has faked his findings," said Ken Goodman, an ethics professor at the University of Miami, who calls such an argument intellectually dishonest.

"When any scientist does something wrong, that's not an argument against that science. It is an argument for robust standards for research integrity," Goodman said.

Hwang's falsifications also have outraged the biggest stakeholders in this fight, those afflicted with diseases and disabilities who might one day be helped by the research.

"The people who lose in the end are people like myself," said Daniel Heumann, a paraplegic who has been in a wheelchair for 20 years.

Competition intense

Heumann, a stem-cell advocate from Michigan, met Hwang several times during his rise to fame. His organization, Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures, is seeking to overturn that state's ban on embryonic stem-cell research. Michigan is one of eight states that explicitly limit embryonic stem-cell research.

"It was like taking a knife and putting it in my heart," Heumann said.

Because stem-cell research is viewed as the next big rainmaker for those in the biomedical field, Hwang's downfall may have been rooted in the temptations of an industry in which those who are first to the plate can expect money and glory. Indeed, the annals of science are filled with researchers who, like Hwang, faked findings and exploited human test subjects.

"This guy was flying high and those kinds of temptations are irresistible. As his status was growing, you could say the lure of stardom was among the motivations for his misconduct," Goodman said.

When Siegel first met Hwang, he had not reached such celebrity. He described Hwang, the son of peasant parents, as having an "engaging personality" and being driven to do his research. At the same time, he said the Korean government, recognizing that there was a cloud over embryonic stem-cell research in the U.S., was "clearly exploiting the political situation" by pouring millions of dollars into Hwang's efforts.

As Siegel looks back on his relationship with Hwang, he says he can't help but wonder who knew about the fraud.

"Some of these people seemed so legitimate. I don't know who to trust, if anyone, in Korea."

In the end, Guenin, the Harvard ethicist, believes this will be a story of one scientific team that claims to have accomplished something it did not, "but which failure does not in any way impugn the promise of the scientific frontier."

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