

Row over study puts Korea's scientific community under scrutiny again

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This week's BMJ investigates a bitter row over a scientific paper that is putting Korea's scientific community under scrutiny once again.

The dispute has pitted a young Korean doctor, Jeong Hwan Kim, against Kwang Yul Cha, a fertility specialist and one of the most powerful players in the country's struggle for biotech supremacy, writes journalist Jonathan Gornall. It is also threatening to disrupt Korea's efforts to recover scientific credibility in the wake of the recent scandal over Woo-Sok Hwang's stem cell research.

Dr Kim claims a paper about premature ovarian failure that he originally published in the *Korean Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* in January 2004 was translated and republished in the American journal *Fertility and Sterility* under a different title and with different authors in December 2005.

What is indisputable is that Dr Kim's name was not present in the later version of the paper and that in his place as lead author was Dr Cha, his former employer and the head of CHA Health Systems, a "global healthcare enterprise" whose interests include the CHA Stem Cell Institute and several hospitals and clinics in Korea and the US.

But the BMJ has learnt that the editor in chief of *Fertility and Sterility* has been threatened with legal action by Dr Cha, and that one of Dr Cha's co-authors on the disputed paper, Dr Sook Hwan Lee, has been charged with criminal copyright infringement.

Dr Kim told the BMJ that the paper had begun life as his PhD thesis and that there were just two names on it when it was published by Korea University in May 2003. He then submitted this as a paper to the Korean Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in July 2003 with five additional names, including Sook Hwan Lee.

But his surprise turned to shock when, in December 2005, he saw a similar paper in Fertility and Sterility. He was even more shocked to see that the number of authors had reduced to six and that he was no longer one of them. The lead author was Dr Cha.

In December last year, Dr Kim filed a lawsuit in Korea against Dr Cha and Dr Lee, alleging breach of copyright. Dr Lee responded by alleging that Dr Kim had defamed her. The CHA group also claims that Dr Kim stole the data used in the study.

In February, the co-director of the CHA Stem Cell Institute, Professor Kwang Soo Kim, wrote to Fertility and Sterility to express regret about the incident. He explained how "our institution will serve a pivotal role in restoring the severely damaged reputation and credibility of stem cell and life science research in Korea after the Hwang scandal."

Professor Kim's intervention leaves little doubt about how seriously the CHA group views the potential of the incident to damage its bid to inherit Hwang's crown, says Gornall. Before his fall from grace, Professor Hwang received the bulk of Korean government funding in stem cell research. But, in November last year, CHA Medical Group announced its plans to succeed Professor Hwang's now defunct World Stem Cell Hub by building Korea's largest stem cell institute on land provided by the Korean government.

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