

Scientists: World still isn't ready for gene-edited babies

November 29 2018, by Marilyn Marchione



David Baltimore, Nobel laureate and chair of the organizing committee delivers the statement by the organizing committee during the Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong, Thursday, Nov. 29, 2018. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

A group of leading scientists has declared that it's still too soon to try making permanent changes to DNA that can be inherited by future generations, as a Chinese researcher claims to have done.

The scientists gathered in Hong Kong this week for an international conference on gene editing, the ability to rewrite the code of life to try to correct or prevent diseases.

Although the science holds promise for helping people already born and studies testing that are underway, a statement issued Thursday by the 14-member conference leaders says it's irresponsible to try it on eggs, sperm or embryos except in lab research because not enough is known yet about its risks or safety.

The conference was rocked by the Chinese researcher's claim to have helped make the world's first gene-edited babies, twin girls he said were born earlier this month. Conference leaders called for an independent investigation of the claim by He Jiankui of Shenzhen, who spoke to the group Wednesday as international criticism of his claim mounted.

There is no independent confirmation of what He says he did. He was scheduled to speak again at the conference on Thursday, but he left Hong Kong and through a spokesman sent a statement saying "I will remain in China, my home country, and cooperate fully with all inquiries about my work. My raw data will be made available for third party review."



David Baltimore, Nobel laureate and chair of the organizing committee delivers the statement by the Organizing Committee during the Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong, Thursday, Nov. 29, 2018. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Several prominent scientists said the case showed a failure of the field to police itself and the need for stricter principles or regulations.

"It's not unreasonable to expect the scientific community" to follow guidelines, said David Baltimore, a Nobel laureate from California Institute of Technology who led the panel.

There already are some rules that should have prevented what He says he did, said Alta Charo, a University of Wisconsin lawyer and bioethicist and a conference organizer.



He Jiankui, a Chinese researcher, speaks during the Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Nov. 28, 2018. He made his first public comments about his claim to have helped make the world's first gene-edited babies. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

"I think the failure was his, not the scientific community," Charo said.

Gene editing for reproductive purposes might be considered in the future "but only when there is compelling medical need," with clear understanding of risks and benefits, and certain other conditions, said Dr. Victor Dzau, president of the U.S. National Academy of Medicine, one of the conference sponsors.

"Not following these guidelines would be an irresponsible act," he added.

Other sponsors of the three-day conference are the Academy of Sciences

of Hong Kong, the Royal Society of the United Kingdom and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and U.S. National Academy Sciences.



He Jiankui, a Chinese researcher, center, speaks during the Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Nov. 28, 2018. He made his first public comments about his claim to have helped make the world's first gene-edited babies. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)



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The audience reacts as He Jiankui, a Chinese researcher, speaks during the Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Nov. 28, 2018. A Chinese researcher claims that he helped make the world's first genetically edited babies—twin girls whose DNA he said he altered with a powerful new tool capable of rewriting the very blueprint of life. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)



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David Baltimore, Nobel laureate and chair of the organizing committee, listens to speakers during the Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong, Thursday, Nov. 29, 2018. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

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