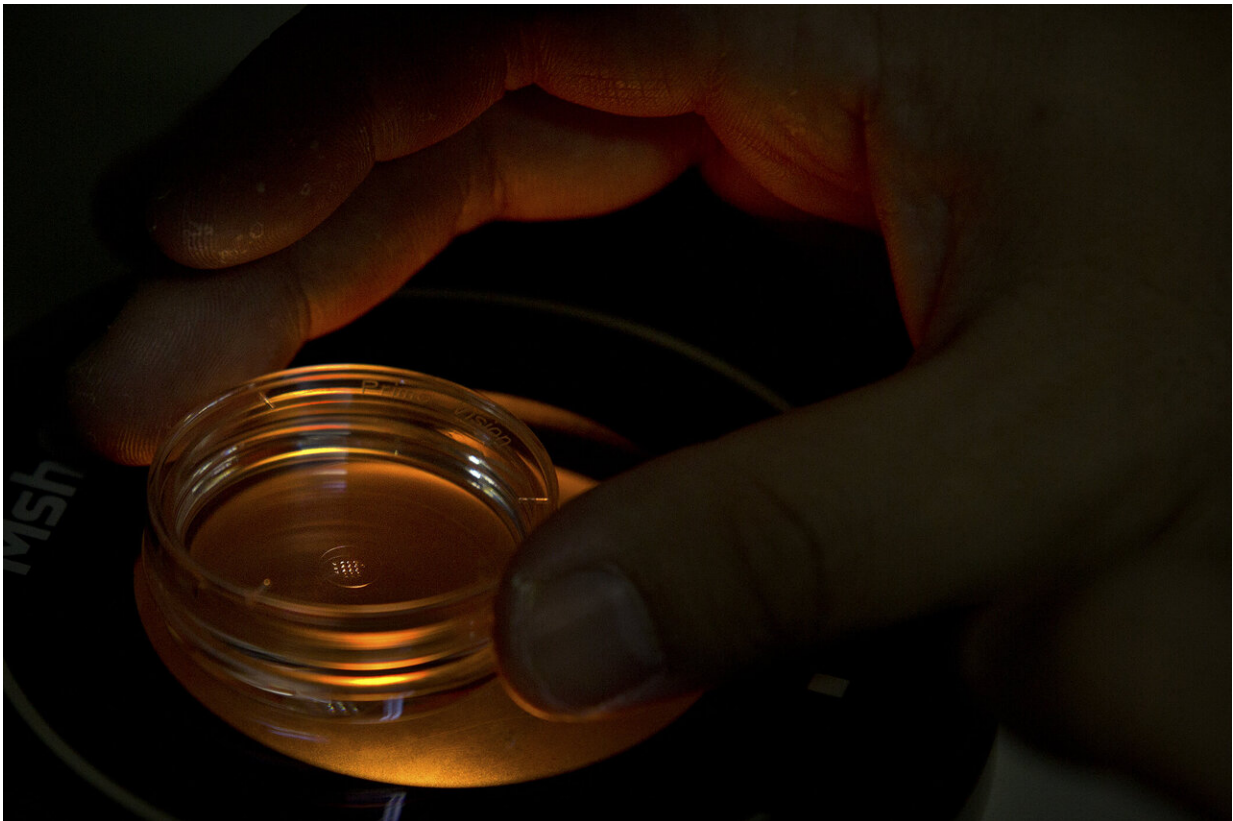


China convicts 3 researchers involved in gene-edited babies

December 30 2019, by Ken Moritsugu



In this Oct. 9, 2018, file photo, an embryologist who was part of the team working with scientist He Jiankui adjusts a microplate containing embryos at a lab in Shenzhen in southern China's Guangdong province. Chinese state media says He has been sentenced to three years for practicing medicine illegally. He Jiankui was also fined 3 million yuan. Two others were also sentenced on the same charge. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein, File)

A Chinese scientist who set off an ethical debate with claims that he had made the world's first genetically edited babies was sentenced Monday to three years in prison because of his research, state media said.

He Jiankui, who was convicted of practicing medicine without a license, was also fined 3 million yuan (\$430,000) by a court in the southern city of Shenzhen, China's official Xinhua News Agency reported. Two other researchers involved in the project received lesser sentences and fines.

The verdict said the three defendants had not obtained qualification as doctors, pursued fame and profits, deliberately violated Chinese regulations on scientific research, and crossed an ethical line in both scientific research and medicine, according to Xinhua. It also said they had fabricated ethical review documents.

The court also confirmed a third birth, saying the researchers were involved in the births of three gene-edited babies to two women. It said all three scientists pleaded guilty during the trial, which Xinhua reported was closed to the public because of privacy concerns.

He, the lead researcher, shocked the scientific world when he announced in November 2018 that he had altered the embryos of twin girls who had been born the same month. He described his work in exclusive interviews with The Associated Press.

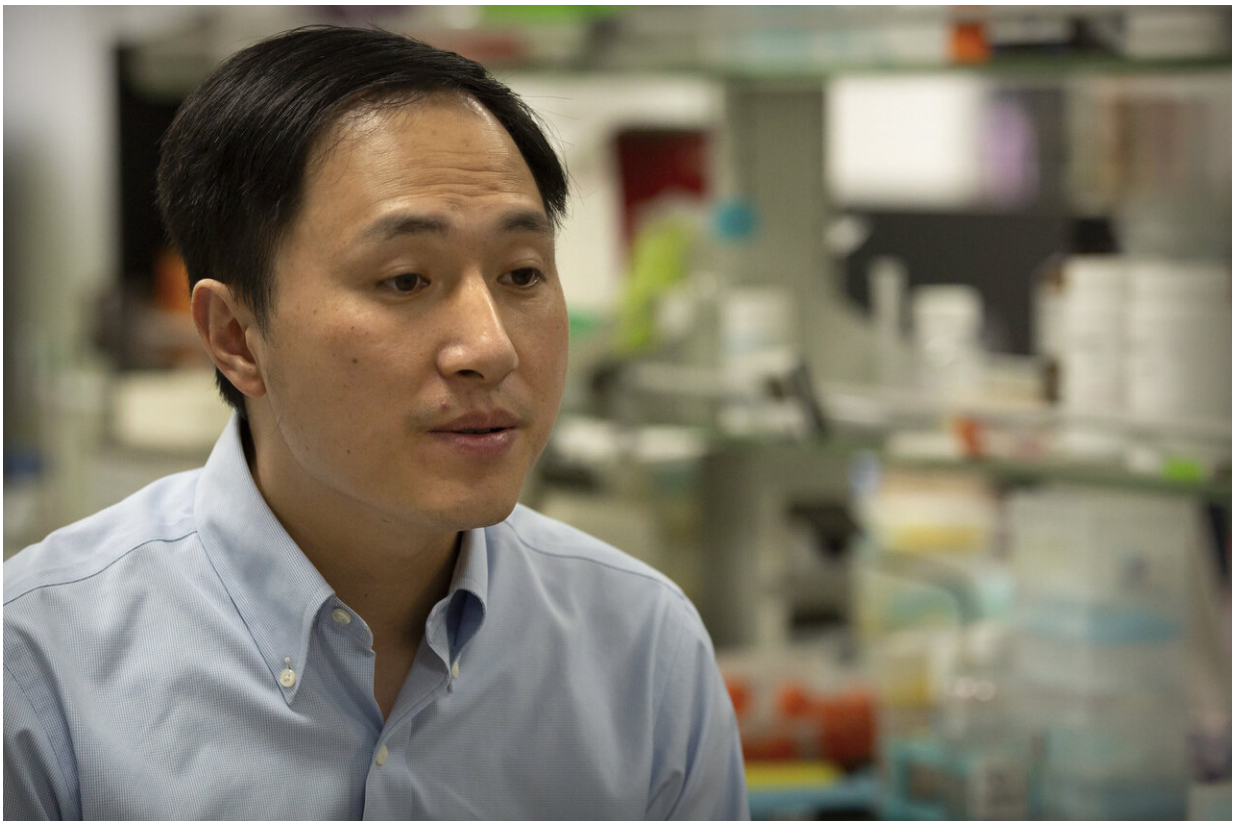


In this Nov. 28, 2018, file photo, He Jiankui, a Chinese researcher, speaks during the Human Genome Editing Conference in Hong Kong, where he made his first public comments about his claim to have helped make the world's first gene-edited babies. Chinese state media says the researcher He has been sentenced to three years for practicing medicine illegally. He Jiankui was also fined 3 million yuan. Two others were also sentenced on the same charge. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung, File)

The announcement sparked a global debate over the ethics of gene editing. He said he had used a tool called CRISPR to try to disable a gene that allows the AIDS virus to enter a cell, in a bid to give the girls the ability to resist the infection. The identity of the children has not been released, and it isn't clear if the experiment succeeded.

The CRISPR tool has been tested elsewhere in adults to treat diseases, but many in the scientific community denounced He's work as medically unnecessary and unethical, because any genetic changes could be passed down to future generations. The U.S. forbids editing embryos except for lab research.

He, who is known as "JK," told the AP in 2018 that he felt a strong responsibility to make an example, and that society would decide whether to allow the practice to go forward. He disappeared from public view shortly after he announced his research at a conference in Hong Kong 13 months ago, apparently detained by authorities, initially in an apartment in Shenzhen, a city in Guangdong province that borders Hong Kong.



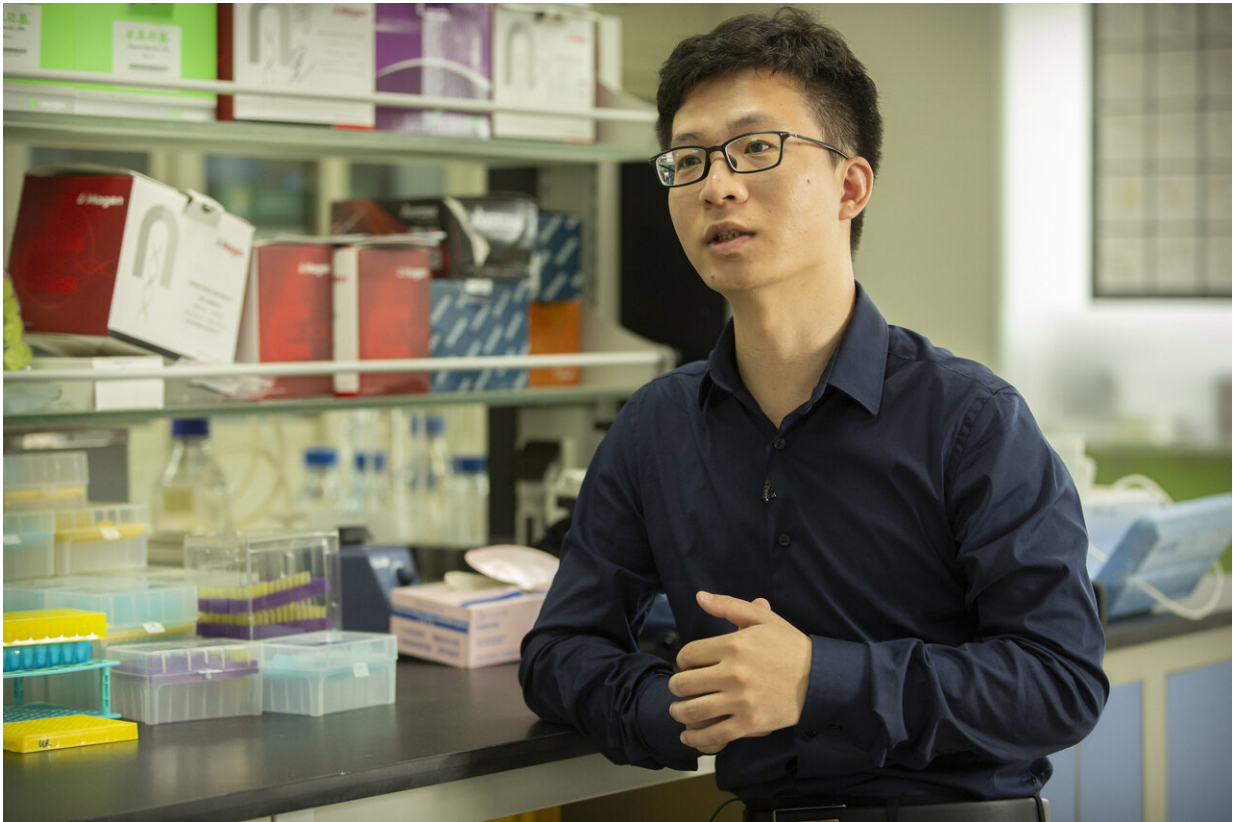
In this Oct. 10, 2018, photo, Chinese scientist He Jiankui speaks during an interview at his laboratory in Shenzhen in southern China's Guangdong province. Chinese state media says the researcher He has been sentenced to three years for practicing medicine illegally. He Jiankui was also fined 3 million yuan. Two others were also sentenced on the same charge. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

It wasn't clear if the three-year prison term includes any of the time he has already spent in Chinese custody.

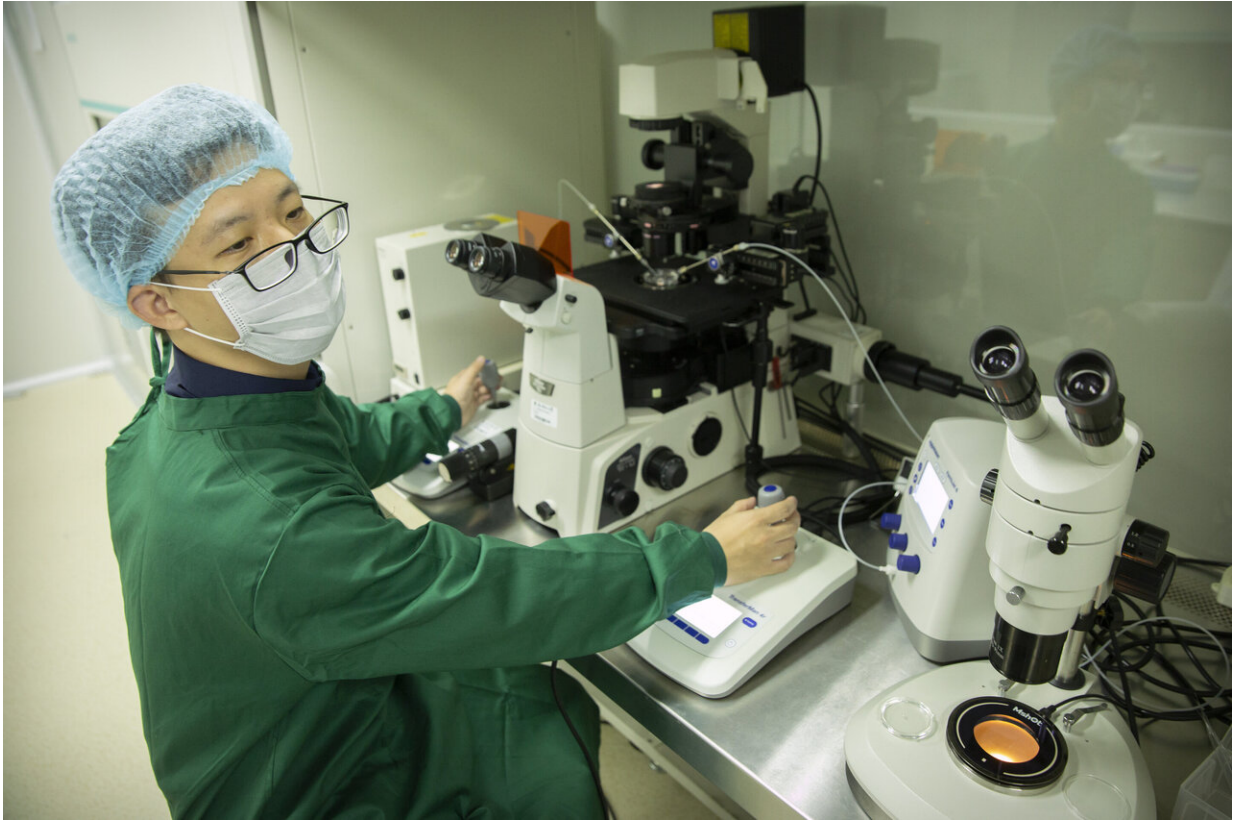
A Chinese scientist said the sentence should have been harsher to deter others. Kehkooi Kee, a Tsinghua University researcher who conducts gene-editing research on stem cells, also said that He should be held responsible for any fallout from the experiment on the lives of the babies and their families.

Dr. William Hurlbut, a Stanford University bioethicist whose advice He sought for more than a year before his experiment, said he felt sorry for the scientist, his wife and two young daughters.

"I warned him things could end this way, but it was just too late," Hurlbut wrote in an email addressed to the AP; the director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins; and gene-editing pioneer Jennifer Doudna at the University of California, Berkeley.



In this Oct. 9, 2018, photo, Chinese scientist Qin Jinzhou speaks during an interview with the Associated Press in a laboratory in Shenzhen in southern China's Guangdong Province. Three researchers involved in the births of genetically edited babies have been convicted and sentenced for practicing medicine illegally, Chinese state media said Monday. Qin received an 18-month sentence, but with a two-year reprieve, and a 500,000 yuan fine. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



In this Oct. 9, 2018, photo, Chinese scientist Qin Jinzhou works with embryos in a laboratory in Shenzhen in southern China's Guangdong Province. Three researchers involved in the births of genetically edited babies have been convicted and sentenced for practicing medicine illegally, Chinese state media said Monday. Qin received an 18-month sentence, but with a two-year reprieve, and a 500,000 yuan fine. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

"Sad story—everyone lost in this (JK, his family, his colleagues, and his country), but the one gain is that the world is awakened to the seriousness of our advancing genetic technologies," Hurlbut wrote.

Dr. Eric Topol, who heads the Scripps Research Translational Institute in California, noted it's almost unheard of for a scientist to get imprisoned "but in this case the sheer recklessness and unethical behavior warranted

it." Topol praised China for standing up "for proper medical research conduct ."

Before setting up a lab at the Southern University of Science and Technology of China in Shenzhen, He studied in the U.S. The verdict accused him of colluding with Zhang Renli and Qin Jinzhou, who worked at medical institutes in the same province.

Zhang was sentenced to two years in prison and fined 1 million yuan, Xinhua said. Qin received an 18-month prison sentence, but with a two-year reprieve, and a 500,000 yuan fine.

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