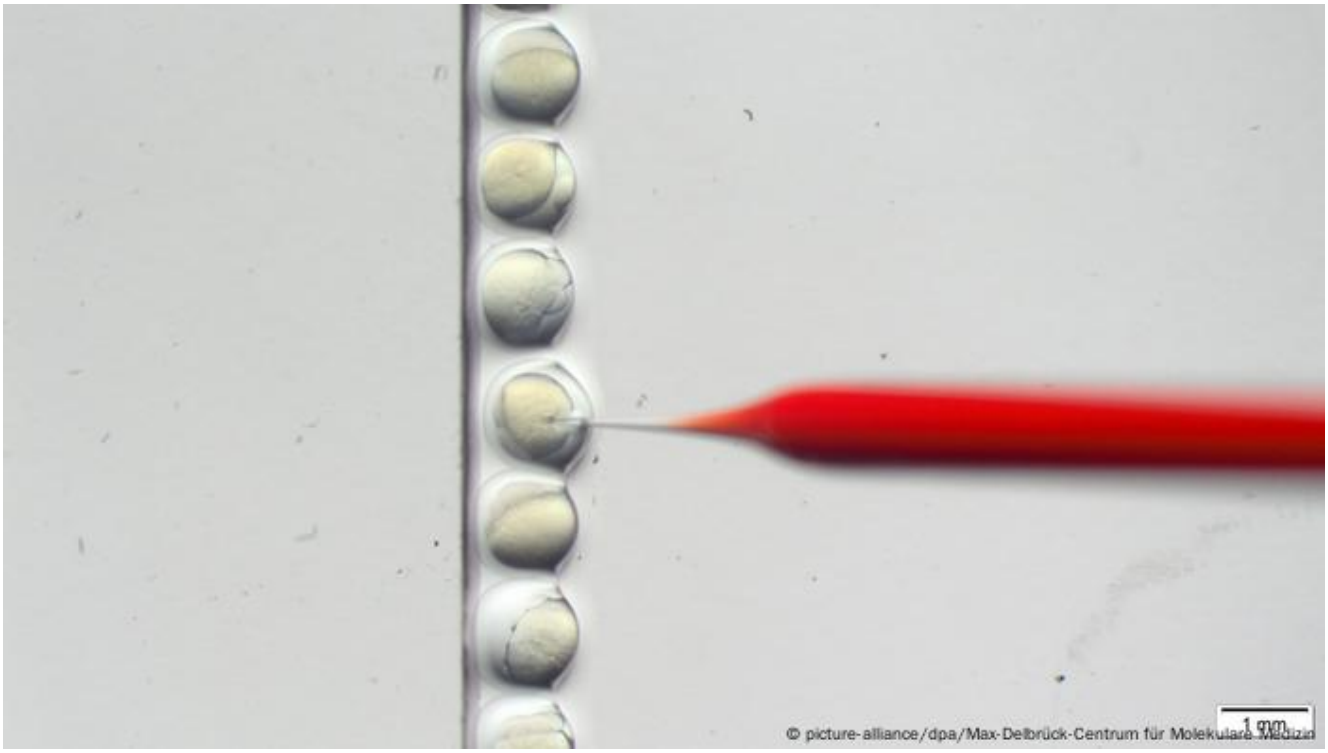
# Opinion: Why we should stop human gene editing

The world's first genetically modified babies have been born — at least that's what a Chinese researcher has claimed. This breach of taboo sends a disturbing signal and must not be tolerated, says DW's Fabian Schmidt.




Chinese researcher He Jiankui's claim that he's helped make the world's first genetically edited babies whose DNA was altered with the new powerful CRISPR/Cas9 tool sounds as credible as it does scary.

The researcher cited two documents to prove his case — an application request sent to the ethics committee of the HarMoniCare gynecological clinic, where he claimed the fertilization was carried out; and a paper informing affected patients in detail about the procedures involved.

An investigation is now underway to find out whether the provided documents are genuine and whether the ethics committee really approved the experiments. The clinic in question has already denied the fertilization and the birth of the babies took place in its compound.

*Read more*:CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing causes lots of mutations

**Alarm bells ringing**

No matter what results the investigation yields, the case shows how urgently doctors and biologists need to agree on binding standards and mechanisms to prevent similar experiments from being carried out. It has to be made clear that researchers involved in such experiments should face severe penalties. Additionally, research institutions should suspend their cooperation with universities and clinics that support such endeavors.

DW science editor Fabian Schmidt

Otherwise, what kind of signal are we sending out? Man must not play God. Do we really want to have designer babies being born to match our latest ideas about what they should be like? Or — like in Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* — do we want a society where humans are produced for specific tasks and probably designed to match the characteristics of different social classes?

This would unhinge the principle of equality for all people. And how would that change our attitude toward people with illnesses and handicaps? Would they just be medical experiments gone wrong? Such thinking evokes the worst memories of the first half of the 20th century.

*Read more*: Dawn of the designer babies? Here's an idiot's guide to human gene editing

**Unforeseeable consequences**

There's a lot more to be said against such experiments, also from a medical point of view. Human germline surgery can always have unforeseeable consequences, even in many generations following childbirth. Scientific evidence showed earlier this year that the use of the CRISPR/Cas9 DNA tool can lead to unwanted

mutations.

So, who will be held responsible if in, say, 60 years from now children are born with serious congenital defects?

And let’s face it: The use of CRISPR/Cas9 is totally unnecessary in this context. He Jiankui said he tried to bestow a trait that few people naturally have — an ability to resist infection with HIV, the AIDS virus. But then we already have effective antiretroviral medication preventing newborns from getting infected by their parents. Later in life, AIDS can be prevented by investing more in safe-sex education and other measures.

And what about other congenital diseases? No, CRISPR/Cas9 cannot be the cure-all there either. Parents with genetic defects who want to give birth to a healthy child can resort to artificial insemination. We should be emancipated enough to live with the fact that the child won’t carry the genes of both parents.

After all, artificial insemination should take precedence over a genetically modified baby that may have severe defects.

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