

Is The 'First Human Clone' A Hoax?

by Ralf Schauerhammer

On Nov. 25 the media of the entire world trumpeted out the news: "The first human being has been cloned!" The trigger for this announcement was a press conference by Michael West, head of the small biotechnology firm Advanced Cell Technology (ACT). He proclaimed that in his firm—faithfully following the motto, "Test it!"—human skin cells have been implanted into human ova (egg cells) from which the nuclei had first been removed; and thereby a genuine human clone has been produced.

The same firm, back in 1998, had in the same way implanted the nuclei of human cells into the ova of cows. At that time West had emphatically declared: "We have absolutely no interest nor any intention, ever to clone a human being." Now, since Nov. 25, we have a demonstration what is to be expected from this kind of "voluntary self-limitation."

Not Actually Clones

What Dr. West has done and proclaimed is, from a scientific standpoint, rather insignificant. Glenn McGee, until two years ago the ethics adviser of ATC, said: "A 12-year-old would have known exactly how to do what ATC has done with this experiment." Ian Wilmut, who achieved fame as the "creator" of the cloned sheep Dolly, even doubted if this was a matter of "true clones."

The criticisms of Dr. Wilmut's team, though put in polite public terms, were weighty. In natural reproductive processes of many species, including humans, the first divisions of the ovum are triggered and controlled within the ovum itself, before contact with the male sperm or zygote, and merely constitute preparation for the formation of an embryo—not actual embryonic formation itself. With these divisions, the actual genetic process of reproduction of a new individual, has not yet been set in motion.

Since the human ova about which ACT made its announcement had apparently not gone beyond these first divisions, there was great reason to doubt they should be called "clones" at all.

The ATC experiment was immediately interpreted as a failure by other researchers, because the cloned embryos died so quickly, that stem cells were very far from being generated from them. In fact, the cloned ova at ATC did not differentiate

to a state of more than six cells, whereas at least 100 cells are needed for stem-cell transplants. In West's own words, this state of affairs indicates, if he must admit it, that "a therapeutic application is still years away."

By the cold light of day, the scientific result of the experiment is exactly nothing, and the sensational press announcement of the "first cloned human being" is revealed as primarily a newspaper hoax.

There remains the question, why West has gone in front of the press with this "result" in the first place. It could not be the hope that he could attract venture capital to his firm with an announcement of this type. A few months ago, one could still perhaps produce fireworks on the stock markets with it, but not any more. And the admission, that therapeutic applications probably lie in the distant future, does not aim straight at the brokers' moneybags.

In reality, it is probably a matter of priority claims, which is explicable in light of the momentarily prevailing legal situation in the United States.

Prospect Of Legislative Action

After it became clear, that the strict "Human Cloning Act of 2001," which the House of Representatives voted up on July 31, would not for the time being pass the U.S. Senate, President Bush announced in August an Executive Order, which prohibited the granting of public funds for research with newly created embryonic stem-cell lines. Private firms, so long as they forswore receiving public research funds, could nevertheless carry on this research. In the event that in the future this research were to be more generally and legally prohibited in the United States—as has already been the case in Germany, for example, for years—companies which up to that point possess the most patents on developed stem-cell lines and the techniques for handling them, will have won the race. Dr. West's hurried press conference over doubtful results of human cloning, is comprehensible against this background of the race for priority claims.

But ACT's announcement only shows the need for immediate legal actions. These scientifically questionable experiments prove how some thoughtless researchers throw overboard all moral scruple. Even if one accepts all the promises and hopes of which the advocates of embryo-experiments boast, up to now the results in animal experiments are so rudimentary, that there is no scientific reason at all to attempt the step from animal to human experiments.

One should not compare the conduct of this research in the United States with the criminal experiments on humans of the Nazi doctors. However, they are a warning example, of how fast the real striving for scientific truth is pushed aside, in the pursuit of sensational and profitable "inventions." And it is not essentially different, if the strife for truth is sacrificed to a racial ideology, or "only" to the god Mammon.