Chinese Scientist Sentenced to Prison for Gene-Editing Human Embryos

The researcher used CRISPR/Cas9 technology to render a pair of twins resistant to HIV.

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The Chinese scientist who genetically modified human embryos so that a pair of twins would be born resistant to HIV was sentenced to three years in prison and fined 3 million yuan ($430,000), reports CNN. The Chinese court ruled that scientist He Jiankui, PhD, had crossed ethical lines and committed illegal medical practices.

He used CRISPR/Cas9 technology to edit the genes of human embryos. Specifically, he altered the CCR5 gene, which affects the coreceptor on immune cells to which HIV attaches. (For background, see the April 2019 POZ article "Chinese Scientists Lambaste Countryman's Editing of Human Embryos.")

The twin girls were born in 2018. At the time, He seemed proud of his accomplishment, claiming it was necessary to protect the girls because their father was living with HIV. His announcement of their birth shocked and outraged the world. It also led to legal troubles in China.

This week, the Shenzhen Nanshan District People's Court sentenced He to three years in prison and a fine. The two researchers He worked with received lesser prison terms as well as fines.

"The court held that the three defendants failed to obtain a doctor's qualification and pursued profit, deliberately violated the relevant national regulations on scientific research and medical management, crossed the bottom line of scientific and medical ethics, and rashly applied gene-editing technology to human-assisted reproductive medicine, and disrupted the medical treatment," the Chinese news agency Xinhua reported, according to CNN. "The nature of their behavior is serious and has constituted the crime of illegal medical practice."

Earlier in 2019, Chinese investigators concluded that He sought personal fame and fortune in his research and deliberately evaded supervision and ethical reviews.

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