



Update: Gene-Editing Researchers Convicted In China

Three years in prison is barely a slap on the hand in China, but three researchers who performed gene-editing experiments on embryos are busted for practicing medicine without a license. Alas, Technocracy marches on. □ TN Editor

A Chinese scientist who set off an ethical debate with claims that he had made the world's first genetically edited babies was sentenced on Dec. 30 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 stated the researchers were involved in the births of three gene-edited babies to two women, confirming reports of a third baby. It stated all three researchers 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 were born that month. He described his work in exclusive interviews with The Associated Press.

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 girls 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 United States 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.

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