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Human cloning may be impossible

By Lauran Neergaard
 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Cloning humans, or any other primates, may be impossible with today's techniques because of a fundamental molecular obstacle, say scientists trying to understand why attempts to clone monkeys have failed.

From the very first step, cloned primate cells don't divide properly, causing a helter-skelter mix of chromosomes too abnormal for pregnancy to even begin, University of Pittsburgh researchers reported Thursday in the journal *Science*.

"Most people in the cloning field will be surprised by this," said lead researcher Gerald Schatten. "This work demonstrates there's a pothole in the process. We now know the depth and breadth of the pothole, and we're designing strategies to get around" it.

Dozens of animal clones — including cows, pigs, mice, goats and a cat — have been born since Dolly the sheep became the first new being created from an adult cell in 1997. But it's still a very uncertain field: Many are stillborn and some survive only with severe defects.

A cult group claimed in December to have cloned a person, something never verified. A doctor who separately is pursuing human cloning has reported in an Internet journal preliminary data on an early-stage cloned human embryo, but with no chromosome information.

Cloning experts worry that attempting human cloning is dangerous not just because of all the barnyard clones with birth defects, but because attempts to clone monkeys — far closer genetically to people — using the Dolly technique so far have failed.

To clone, scientists harvest an unfertilized egg from a female donor, removing the genetic material and replacing it with new DNA from an adult cell of the animal to be cloned. An electric shock coaxes it into dividing. If all goes well, the egg grows into an embryo that can be implanted into a surrogate mother.

It took 277 attempts before Dolly was born. Schatten's group tried even longer to clone a rhesus monkey — 724 eggs that yielded only 33 embryos and not a single pregnancy.

For cells to properly divide, chromosomes must duplicate themselves and precisely line up along a zipper-like structure called a spindle. Once the chromosomes are in place, the spindle helps the cell pull apart into two. During human reproduction, if the chromosomes don't split properly, defects such as Down syndrome result, or the pregnancy fails.

Schatten wondered if chromosome abnormalities were behind failed monkey clonings. Indeed, inside cloned monkey cells, the Pittsburgh researchers discovered deformed spindles and chaotic chromosome numbers.

Why? Eggs harbor proteins that act as molecular motors that are key to spindle formation. In primates, those proteins are so tightly bound to the egg's DNA that cloning's first step of DNA removal pulls them out, too, dooming hope of later pregnancy, Schatten said.

In other mammals, enough spindle-forming proteins float in the egg's remaining fluid for reproduction to occur, he said. The discovery is very important, said Dr. Duane Kraemer, a successful cloner of non-primates at Texas A&M University.

"The fact that they don't get pregnancies

How cloning works

An egg's nucleus is removed and replaced with DNA from the cell of the animal to be cloned.

Inside the egg, cells prepare to multiply as chromosomes duplicate themselves.

Motor proteins in the egg help form zipper-like spindles that the chromosomes use to align. Once in place, the spindles help pull the cell into two identical parts.

Cells continue to divide until the embryo is ready to plant into a surrogate mother.

Healthy, developing embryo

Abnormal cells in egg

Tiny proteins block cloning capabilities

Scientists haven't been able to clone monkeys like they can clone barnyard animals. Now they've discovered why: proteins removed in the cloning process cause a chromosomal mismatch.

What goes wrong
 When the nucleus is removed from a monkey egg, motor proteins cling to it and are also removed. That doesn't happen when cloning non-primates.

Spindles don't form correctly.

Misaligned Chromosomes

Cells divide, but abnormal chromosomes can cause defects and affect the pregnancy.

SOURCE: University of Pittsburgh

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Government looks to halt slavery tax scam

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department on Thursday asked a federal court to block a Georgia man from selling a slavery reparations tax scam.

The government, in papers filed in Macon, Ga., allege that Morris James Sr. of Montezuma and his company, National

Resource Information Center, went to churches nationwide promoting a bogus tax refund related to slavery reparations. The court papers say more than 6,300 customers purchased the tax preparation services.

"Claiming tax benefits for slavery reparations, segregation, treatment as a second-class citizen, or on other similar grounds is illegal," said Eileen J. O'Connor, assistant attorney general for Justice's tax divi-

sion. "The Justice Department is taking vigorous action to stop schemes that undermine the federal tax system and leave honest taxpayers footing the bill."

In a typical slavery reparations scheme, a tax preparer charges the customer to prepare a refund claiming the non-existent credit. Taxpayers can face a \$500 penalty for filing such claims.

In 2001, the Internal Revenue

Service received about 80,000 tax returns claiming \$2.7 billion in reparations refunds. The majority of claims come from taxpayers in the South. An aggressive campaign by the Congressional Black Caucus and other organizations drastically cut the number.

The Justice Department recently has obtained court orders to stop five other tax preparers from promoting selling reparations schemes.

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Regulators plan to overhaul FCC media ownership rules

By David Ho
 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Fifteen senators asked regulators Thursday to disclose their plans for overhauling media ownership restrictions before going ahead with the changes.

Debate over the Federal Communications Commission's review has heated up as the agency's planned June 2 vote nears.

The FCC is studying whether decades-old ownership restrictions belong in a market altered by satellite broadcasts, cable television and the Internet.

The rules include limits on the national reach of television broadcasters, a ban on mergers between major television networks and a restriction preventing a company from owning a newspaper and a radio or television station in the same city.

In a letter to FCC Chairman Michael Powell, five Republicans and 10 Democrats, most of them on the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, said they were disappointed that the updated rules would be released

"without any opportunity for the Congress or the public to review them beforehand."

"Dramatic changes in the structure of our media marketplace could have long-term consequences on the diversity of voices and free expression in our nation," said the lawmakers including Sen. Ernest Hollings of South Carolina, the committee's top Democrat.

FCC spokesman Richard Diamond said the agency is working on a response.

Last week, 12 other lawmakers took an opposite position, calling the current ownership restrictions outdated and urging Powell to complete the review on schedule. Those lawmakers included four members of the Senate committee and Rep. Bill Tauzin, R-La., chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

The Small Business Administration wrote to Powell, saying that the FCC has moved too quickly to alter the rules and should back off, allowing more time for comments.

Powell said the FCC will seek more comment, but he is not inclined to do it without good reason.

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