

First GM camels to be engineered for drug production

The project aims to slash the prices of life-saving drugs — including insulin, and clotting factors for treating haemophilia — in the Middle East and North Africa, according to Nisar Wani, head of the Reproductive Biology Laboratory at Dubai's Camel Reproduction Center, in the United Arab Emirates.

The cost of camel milk in the region is comparable to that of cow's milk, but the former is more suited to local climates, said Wani. Camels are highly resistant to disease, easier to maintain in the region's arid climate, and are more efficient in converting food [into body mass] than cows.

"We are establishing camel cells modified with exogenous [foreign] DNA, for use in producing transgenic cloned animals, or GM camels," Wani told *SciDev.Net*. "Hopefully we will transfer camel transgenic embryos to surrogate mothers for the first time later this year."

Wani said he was unable to pinpoint when the first transgenic animal would be born, as the calving rate for cloned embryos was only five per cent, and "this rate gets even smaller when transgenic cells are used". "We have crossed some critical barriers but still need to do a lot of work to reach the final destination," he added.

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