

Health, ethics, or money: What's really driving CRISPR debate?

A momentous technological revolution is unfolding in our very real, no longer fictive ability to easily and cheaply alter the human germ line. A technological development called CRISPR, which stands for “clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats,” allows scientists to both delete and add *heritable* genetic variants. Worried about Alzheimer's? Ovarian cancer? Parkinson's? Simply edit it out of your body, or that of your children's children. Don't like red hair? Short stature? Big nose? Ditto. Want strong bones? Resistance to heart disease? Oh, snap. The process is so simple and low-cost that, according to Harvard University geneticist George Church, it's “going to get to the point where it's like you are doing the equivalent of cosmetic surgery.”

Real debate about this is emerging in the scientific community. In the past few weeks, there have been calls from an impressive array of scientists—including Church and a number of those involved in the discovery of CRISPR—to slow down its use in humans. Some scientists have called only for a public conversation; others have called for a moratorium, arguing that the technology effectively allows non-consensual experimentation on future human generations.

But many more scientists see this technology as an irrefutably good thing. Says bioethicist John Harris, of Manchester University in the UK, “The human genome is not perfect... It's ethically imperative to positively support this technology.” Earlier this year, the National Institutes of Health launched an initiative “to leverage genomics, informatics, and health information technology to accelerate biomedical discoveries.” This week, NIH announced the panel overseeing the project. It includes representatives of corporations like Intel and Google, the Defense Department, and a healthy array of venture capitalists. The goal is to create a “national research cohort of about 1 million people, whose biological data, as well as environmental, lifestyle and behavioral information” is to be shared with researchers.

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