Viewpoint: Breaking taboos or pioneering breakthroughs? Weighing ethics of gene editing of human embryos

The German Ethics Council has now… ruled that inheritable genome editing is fundamentally morally permissible. All of these organizations formulate vague cost-benefit estimates as a basis for starting clinical trials, which assume a reduction in the technology’s error rate but do not specifically state how much risk is acceptable. [CRISPR babies creator He Jiankui] obviously made this assessment differently than the scientific mainstream and assessed the technology as already precise enough for use in the clinic. He seemed surprised by the negative reactions, including from the science community.

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In fact, inheritable genome editing is currently banned in over 70 countries. In Germany, for example – apart from the German Embryo Protection Act – the EU’s Oviedo Convention applies. It prohibits interventions aimed at “altering the genome of offspring.” However, driven by the promise of science, these legal restrictions may soon crumble: in the UK, there is currently talk of legalizing germline modifications this year. Due to these developments, further steps towards the implementation of designer babies in reproductive medicine were expected for the third summit in London in March, which had been postponed by a year due to the COVID19 pandemic.

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