

# Outrage at scientist's 'monstrous' gene editing

UK academics attack 'unethical' video that suggests human embryos were tampered with

By Sarah Knapton SCIENCE EDITOR

A CHINESE university is investigating claims that one of its scientists genetically edited human babies, an experiment branded "monstrous" by British academics who called for an immediate global ban. In a YouTube video posted

yesterday, He Jiankui, of the Southern University of Science and Technology, in Shenzhen, said he had altered embryos for seven couples during fertility treatment, which had led to the birth of twins earlier this month.

The scientist said his goal was to give the babies a natural ability to resist HIV. But the university said that he had been on unpaid leave since February and warned the research – which has not been verified – was a "serious violation of academic ethics and norms".

A joint statement from a group of 100 scientists in China criticised the pro-

ject, saying it was "a great blow" to the country's reputation, while UK researchers strongly condemned the announcement and one of the inventors of the gene-editing technology called for an immediate worldwide ban.

Prof Julian Salulescu, an expert in medical ethics from Oxford University, said: "If true, this experiment is monstrous. These healthy babies are being used as genetic guinea pigs. This is genetic Russian roulette.

"It exposes healthy normal children to risks of gene editing for no real necessary benefit and contravenes dec-

ades of ethical consensus and guidelines on the protection of human participants in research. In many other places in the world, this would be illegal, punishable by imprisonment."

Dr Sarah Chan, of the University of Edinburgh, called it "irresponsible, unethical and designed to provoke maximum shock value".

"Playing with children's health and families' hopes in order to use them as a means for a cheap publicity stunt is nothing short of despicable."

In five videos posted yesterday, the scientist said he had used the gene-ed-

iting technology known as Crispr to rewrite the DNA of twin girls and claimed the experiment had "worked safely as intended", saying the girls were "as healthy as any other babies".

The scientist defended his work, saying in one video: "I understand my work will be controversial, but I believe families need this technology. And I'm willing to take the criticism."

Despite providing no evidence or documentation to back up the claims, he said he planned to share data about the trial at a scientific forum this week in Hong Kong and promised his results

would be submitted for peer review and published.

However, Feng Zhang, one of the inventors of Crispr, called for a global moratorium as he was "deeply concerned" by the lack of transparency.

Dr David King, the director of Human Genetics Alert, an independent public interest watchdog based in London, said: "If these claims are true, the world has changed – it's a day that I and many others have dreaded.

"But it underscores the need for an immediate global ban on the cloning and genetic engineering of humans."

Telescop 27-11-2018