

Open Letter to News Editors

21/01/04

Dear Editors,

We write to appeal to you as programme and newspaper editors to reconsider the prominence given to repeated claims by certain scientists that they have cloned a human being, including those made by Dr Panos Zavos last weekend.

Over the past two years such announcements have grabbed headlines despite the fact that none of those involved have produced a shred of evidence to substantiate their assertions – including Antinori, who made repeated cloning claims throughout 2002, the Raelian sect, who got huge publicity after Christmas 2002, and now Zavos.

We understand that no journalist can afford to miss the possible story of the first human clone and, if evidence appears to that effect, it will be of huge public interest. We also accept that the media's role and priorities are of course different to those of the scientific community. However we feel that there is a tradition within the culture of journalism to which we can appeal, that any future claims should be treated with scepticism until convincing evidence is provided.

Our main reasons for this appeal are the following:

- By ignoring the well-established processes for scrutinising new scientific developments in favour of making unvalidated announcements directly to the media, these individuals have shown that they are more interested in publicity than advancing science.
- Dr Zavos came here exclusively to get publicity. As with previous similar media announcements, he was richly rewarded, leading almost every news bulletin on television and radio throughout the day. He and others are thus allowed huge air time to prey on the desperate hopes of infertile couples for whom current infertility treatments do not work and on the fears of those who feel that science is out of control.
- We fear that the disproportionate coverage given to these stories convey the impression that fertility scientists in general are engaged in the race to clone the first human. In fact the opposite is the case. Mainstream fertility experts are united in their opposition to this work and Parliament has banned reproductive cloning in the UK.

We welcome the fact that the media has given time and space to scientists to rebut these claims and all of the signatories to this letter have made themselves available to the media on previous occasions to assure the public that this is bad science done by discredited scientists. Yet despite the lack of evidence forthcoming on each occasion, we are still expected to respond each time a bogus claim is made. We appeal to those making the decisions about the priority given to these stories to wait until real evidence appears before providing these individuals with such a prominent platform in future.

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Signed:

Prof Richard Gardner, FRS - Chair, Royal Society Working Group on Stem Cell Research and Cloning

Prof Colin Blakemore - Chief Executive, Medical Research Council (MRC)

Prof Julia Goodfellow - Chief Executive, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)

Lord May of Oxford - President, Royal Society

Prof Robert Winston - Imperial College

Dr Simon Fishel - Director, Centres for Assisted Reproduction (CARE)

Suzi Leather - Chair, HFEA

Prof Chris Higgins - Director, MRC Clinical Sciences Centre, Imperial College

Prof Alison Murdoch - Chair, British Fertility Society

Dr Wolf Reik - Head, Developmental Genetics Programme, Babraham Institute

Prof Robin Lovell-Badge - Head of Genetics, MRC National Institute for Medical Research

Dr Harry Griffin - Deputy Director, Roslin Institute

Dr Sue Avery - Chair, Association of Clinical Embryologists