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Scientists urge greater scrutiny of studies

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By Dan Vergano, USA TODAY

A panel of scientists Tuesday called for more scrutiny of "high-impact" studies published by science journals, a reaction to the bogus stem cell findings trumpeted last year in the journal *Science*.

Tarnishing the already controversial field of embryonic stem cell research — and the prestige of *Science* — Seoul National University announced last year that a team led by South Korea's Hwang Woo Suk faked its claim of easily cloning 12 embryonic stem cell lines.

Scientists had hoped to use these cells to create rejection-free transplant tissues.

Instead, the fraud findings led to university investigations, firings, prosecutions and criticism of *Science's* system of peer review, in which experts independently assess whether study results should be published. Peer review is a bedrock of modern science.

"Progress in science depends on breakthroughs and in taking risks, both in research and in publishing," says the review committee formed by *Science* and headed by Stanford University's John Brauman.

But "the current process, predicated on the assumption that there is no misrepresentation, is not adequate," concludes the panel, which included Harvard's Douglas Melton, a top stem cell researcher.

"The environment for science has changed," says *Science* editor-in-chief Don Kennedy. The report noted the rewards of publishing in *Science*, or its rival journal *Nature*, such as "enhanced reputation, visibility, position or cash rewards is sufficiently high that some may not adhere to the usual scientific standards." Kennedy said *Science* will follow the panel's recommendations, including:

- Higher scrutiny of studies with surprising, newsworthy or political impacts.
- Reporting the roles of all authors and co-authors.
- Establishing common review standards with other journals.


"*Science* says that it is committed to change, so one should take them at their word and see what follows," says science misconduct expert Nicholas Steneck of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

The Hwang scandal follows the 2002 research fraud involving Bell Lab's researcher Jan Hendrik Schön, which involved about two dozen papers in *Science*, *Nature* and elsewhere. Last year, a *Nature* survey found 33% of respondents cut corners in research, although fewer than 1% admitted faking data.

Steneck notes the panel found reviewers accepted incomplete answers to questions about Hwang's work. "Misconduct is not rare and, as the Hwang and Schön cases both demonstrate, had the research network surrounding each done its job, the misconduct would have been caught much earlier," he says in an e-mail.

Even so, "current peer review procedures are based on trust," says Brian Martinson of HealthPartners Research Foundation in Minneapolis. "The report makes clear that is an increasingly risky position to take."

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