

# Raelians In First Bid To Clone Human

by TOBY MOORE in NEW YORK  
and MICHAEL HANLON in LONDON

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A BIZARRE religious cult is to try to produce the world's first human clone by "re-creating" a dead girl.

An American couple have paid £300,000 to the cult's scientists following the death of their 10-month-old daughter. Work will start this month on cells the couple preserved after the child died in what is being described as a medical accident.

Yesterday controversy raged over the ethics of the plan. British cloning expert Prof Ian Wilmut, who created Dolly the Sheep, said: "It is absolutely criminal to try this in a human."

The Rael cult believes cloning is the key to "eternal life" and claims humans were cloned from aliens. At a press conference in Canada it announced that up to 50 surrogate mothers had volunteered to carry cloned human embryos in their wombs.

Dr Brigitte Boisselier, scientific director of the Raelians, which claims 50,000 members in 85 countries, said: "We've got the funding. We anticipate being able to start in October."

The Raelian cult founded by Claude Vorilhon, a 53-year-old French former sportswriter, has already set up Clonaid, a Bahamas company to produce babies for homosexual couples. Its laboratory is reported to be in a Third World country where human cloning is not illegal.

Rael told the press conference in a Montreal hotel, at which he was surrounded by some of the surrogate mothers, that the mother of the child who died would not be amongst them. If the pregnancy failed, he said, she would not have to endure "losing the same child again."

The Raelians offered no proof that they had any of the medical skills required to clone, but they last year stated their ambition to make it happen and, according to impartial scientists, there is no longer any technical reason why they should not succeed.

The Raelian cult has been at the forefront of the informal race to produce a cloned child. Boisselier did not identify the American couple who have put up the money to produce a clone of their 10-month-old daughter from her cells. Neither did she identify the team who will work on the task.

But the announcement in Montreal, last month, is being treated seriously by academics with no interest in the stranger aspects of the Rael religion.

Lee Silver, a Princeton University biologist and authority of cloning techniques, said: "Just like the Aum Shinrikyo religious group, which recruited highly trained chemists to develop nerve gas for their attack on a Tokyo subway train, I bet that the Raelians could find the highly trained people they would need to carry out human cloning.

"I get letters all the time from people who want to be cloned. I have no doubt it will happen very soon."

"People with experience in vitro fertilisation would probably be able to do it," said Michael West, chief executive of Advanced Cell Technology, in Massachusetts. His company has been cloning human embryo cells in the hope of developing medical treatments. "The directions are all in the scientific literature. They're not top secret."

Experts believe that the biggest obstacle to human cloning is not that it requires particularly complex technical ability, but that it would take many failed pregnancies to achieve a success. There is also political unease over the process, which is why human cloning is banned in 19 countries, though not the United States.

“It’s a numbers game,” said George Seidel, a cloning expert at Colorado University. “It’s very likely that if you did it enough times you could make it work.”

Scientists generally agree that 20 human egg donors and 50 surrogate mothers offer the probability of making a human clone.

But leading genetics experts condemned the plan. Prof Ian Wilmut, the man who created Dolly the Sheep at the Roslin Institute near Edinburgh condemned the plan. “It sounds to me like a very misguided exercise,” he said.

“Clearly everybody feels very sorry for any couple who loses a child but you cannot get that child back. People should realise that as a biological truth.

“Quite apart from that, it is absolutely criminal to try this in a human.”

Dr Vivienne Nathanson, head of ethics at the British Medical Association said the cloning bid could cause a public outcry.

“They may succeed and if they do it will be very interesting,” she said. “But rather than winning a Nobel Prize these people may have to face almost universal condemnation.

“There’s a fairly broad consensus worldwide that this is undesirable. It’s too risky and underpinning the scientific risk there are tremendous moral and ethical problems. I’m not convinced that people understand how unsafe the science is.”

Professor Robert Winston, the test tube baby pioneer, said that cloning technology was so new that it would be very unlikely to produce a healthy

baby. “As they are so extremely unlikely to succeed I hardly feel the need to raise my voice to condemn them,” he said.

Cloning involves producing a genetic twin from a single cell, for example a skin cell. Cattle, mice and pigs have all been cloned since the birth of

Dolly the sheep in Scotland in 1996. Dolly was the first mammal ever cloned from an adult.

The biggest obstacle to creating a human clone is obtaining a supply of eggs. A scientist wishing to clone a person would need dozens of healthy human eggs - meaning that several women would have to be paid to have their ovaries stimulated with hormones - a painful and potentially dangerous process.

Once harvested, the eggs are then denucleated - their DNA is removed using a fine syringe. DNA extracted from cells from the individual to be cloned is then injected into the egg.

The fusion of DNA and egg is then stimulated using chemicals or an electric jolt. The growing embryo is cultivated in the lab until it is big enough to be implanted into the womb.

Cloning in animals is a hit-and-miss affair. Hundreds of sheep eggs were injected to produce Dolly, although the cloning success rate has been improving in the years since. Even if an egg can be made to divide, it will not always grow into an embryo that can be implanted. And a large number of cloning pregnancies in sheep, cows and mice end in failure - either by miscarriage or the death of the newborn shortly after birth.

Cloned animals tend to be larger than normal, and this can lead to developmental problems.

But there is no evidence that a healthy clone is any different to a “normal” animal. There were fears that Dolly was ageing faster than normal - she had been cloned from a six-year-old ewe - but these fears appear to be unfounded.

## A serious menace despite those claims of sex with aliens

THE Raelians’ sinister tentacles stretch across the Atlantic and into Britain, experts say.

Graham Baldwin, director of Catalyst, a British charity which helps people damaged by cults, described the Rael movement as “very dangerous” and with huge financial assets, including £15million in one Swiss bank account alone.

“What is so worrying is that the man behind it believes he is not answerable to any rules or rulers,” he added. “It’s these people who end up doing terrible things to their supporters.” The organisation, which describes itself as “the world’s largest UFO related, non-profit organisation” was founded by a French racing driver and journalist named Claude Vorilhon, who says he had an erotic encounter with aliens in 1973.

Now calling himself Rael, he lives in Canada and teaches that life on Earth was created some 25,000 years ago with DNA imported by aliens. He thinks that human cloning is the way to eternal life.

His beliefs, which are big on free sex and spontaneous nudity, have not surprisingly drawn about 50,000 members in 85 countries. Most are in Quebec.

Commentators have noted the high number of attractive people the cult seems to attract, usually between the ages of 17 and 28.

Rael recently began racing cars again, but has denied that the 25 women who regularly travel with him to races are a harem. He says they are his public relations executives.

His “religion” has 125 priests and 24 bishops, and Rael lives in a home near Montreal which houses UFOland, a theme park. The star exhibit is a full-size model of the space ship he says he boarded for his erotic encounter with “the eternal”. But however absurd the cult may seem, its aim to produce a cloned human and its huge resources lend its pronouncements some credibility.

The scientific arm of the religion is Clonaid, set up to help infertile and homosexual couples have children. Valiant Ventures, also based in the

Bahamas, promises to help parents produce a clone of one of them. A third offshoot, Clonapet is offering to recreate dogs and cats and champion race horses.

It is not Rael or his weird beliefs that interest those most concerned about the ethics of cloning. They mainly fear the head of his scientific operations and a bishop in his church, Dr Brigitte Boisselier. She is unabashed in her determination to move the process forward.

She said recently: “I’m a scientist and very pragmatic even if I do believe in little green men.” Graham Baldwin said that contacts with people who had left the religion found them disturbed by their experience. “The general feeling is that he produces a nervous dependency, taking away their freedom.”

He said Rael was dangerous because his claims about meetings with aliens lulled authorities across the world into assuming he was just a joke figure.

“The idea that they will clone a human is very credible because they seem to have the ambition and vast amounts of money. The mistake is that people have not taken Rael seriously.”

## A mad idea whether it fails or succeeds

COMMENTARY BY ANDREW BROWN IT IS quite right that it should be a lunatic cult that first announces plans to clone a human baby: the project is moral lunacy whether it succeeds or fails.

What's truly frightening about it is that only the technology is new. The practice of producing babies for reasons that have nothing to do with their merits as individuals goes back as far as history and continues to this day.

When Diana Spencer married into the Royal Family, it was clearly understood that her duty was to produce an heir.

The children of such a marriage might be, as we hope all children will be, a testimony to their parents' enduring love. But they could just as well be no more than a dynastic necessity.

In the same way, many - perhaps most - children in the poor world are born because their parents need help in the fields or care in their old age.

Only modern, middle-class families suppose that children are normally born for their own sake, just as it is only modern people who say: "I would not bring a child into a world like this." For most of history there has been no choice.

But the Raelians have a choice; and they are choosing wrongly.

This is partly a moral argument: children are individuals, who should be treasured for their own sakes, and not as substitutes for other children.

And a cloned child is not a reincarnation or a recreation of the original but another unique human. Clones are not the same as each other any more than identical twins are, in fact they would be much less like each other than identical twins, since not only would they have slightly different DNA, but they would also and more importantly have grown in different wombs.

So the poor misguided woman who has been told that she will get her lost child back has been lied to; and this lie will guarantee great suffering for other people too, whether or not a child is born at the end of it.

Cloning is hugely wasteful. Dolly was the only survivor of 347 embryos, many of which were aborted in late pregnancy. If this plan goes through, many of the surrogate mothers will suffer horrible miscarriages - for nothing but a cult leader's megalomania.

Perhaps the only worse outcome would be for the project to result in two babies being born.

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*Andrew Brown is an expert on evolution and genetics and is author of *The Darwin Wars* (Simon and Schuster £16.99).*

# Cloning Cult

*A group claiming it will soon clone a baby is widely condemned*

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A Canada-based UFO cult says it is about to clone a dead baby girl but the claim has been condemned by scientists who think it is unlikely, though not impossible, that the group will succeed.

The Raelians claim they have the funds, the scientific know-how and a willing group of 50 surrogate mothers. They first announced their intention to clone a human last year. Now the group's scientific director, Dr Brigitte Boisselier, says the process will start this month.

An American couple have reportedly paid \$500,000 to clone their dead daughter.

Reproductive and cloning scientists have condemned the plan. Ian Wilmut, who cloned Dolly the sheep at the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh, has called the plan misguided and "criminal".

## No evidence

The group has provided no evidence that it has the technical expertise to go ahead. But scientists think the expertise may not be hard to find.

They also accept that the Raelians have the necessary human resources.

The high failure rate of cloned embryo pregnancies means a large number of surrogate mothers would be required to guarantee success.

This has been seen as a stumbling block in cloning humans. But 50 surrogate mothers may be enough.

The Raelians have already set up a company called Clonaid, with the aim of helping homosexual couples have a child. And they are thought to have a laboratory in a country where human cloning is not currently illegal.

One British charity that helps ex-cult members says the Raelians have the money and the ambition to succeed.

The cult was set up in 1973 by French sports journalist Claude Vorilhon, who believes humans were cloned from aliens. It claims to have 50,000 members around the world.

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