Opinion: We can engineer a better baby, but we should be careful

By Project Syndicate, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.19.16
Word Count 646

Our genes set the pattern for many aspects of our lives, from hair and skin color to our likelihood to contract certain diseases. If we are able to save future generations from illnesses through gene editing, we should use that tool to stop suffering. But we should set limits on how that technology is used. Photo: AP/Allison Joyce

NEW YORK, N.Y. – Genes make us who we are. They are responsible for what we look like. For example, there is a gene for red hair. Genes can also be responsible for serious physical problems.

Genes are inherited, or passed down from parent to child. That is why we look like our parents. Unfortunately, we also sometimes inherit harmful genes that make us more likely to become sick.

Scientists have long hoped to be able to change the genes in our bodies. If they could do that, they could stop a harmful gene from being passed down. Perhaps doctors could even remove harmful genes from a baby’s body while it is still inside its mother’s womb.

The day scientists have hoped for is almost here. Very soon they will be able to remove or change human genes. A new tool is already being used to change the genes of insects and animals. Removing, adding or changing genes is known as gene editing.
A Promise To Help Stop Diseases

The new tool is called CRISPR. It allows scientists to remove and add genes cheaply and easily. It is only a matter of time before it will be used on humans. Soon, scientists may be able to get rid of many dangerous inherited diseases.

Still, some people are worried about possible problems. They say human gene editing could be unsafe and might be used unfairly. They also worry that it will be used for much more than just getting rid of diseases.

None of these fears will stop CRISPR from being widely used, however.

Fears about safety are probably unnecessary. All tests and experiments so far show there is little risk involved. CRISPR seems to work well.

Fairness is certainly an important concern. Gene editing will probably be expensive, so the rich may be the ones using it. The poor may not be able to afford it.

However, that probably will not stop doctors from offering gene editing.

Fears About How Technology Will Be Used

After all, the world is unfair in many ways. The rich send their kids to the best schools, while the poor are often forced to send their children to the worst. The same thing will probably happen with gene editing, whether we like it or not.

The most important fear is that gene editing will lead to eugenics. It is a science that tries to improve the human race by selecting the genes of future children. The goal of eugenics is not to make people well but to make them perfect. The problem is, who gets to decide what perfect is?

Many people may want to pay doctors to make their children smarter, stronger or better looking. However, such unnecessary enhancement may not be the right thing to do. Perhaps doctors should only use CRISPR to stop people from becoming sick.

If We Have The Tool, We Should Use It

Such worries are understandable. However, they are not enough of a reason to block the use of CRISPR. There are so many terrible inherited diseases, and it is unreasonable not to get rid of them when it is possible to do so. The sick should not be left untreated just because of fears that some parents will want to build superkids.

It is time to stop arguing about whether CRISPR should be used in humans. It will be, whether we like it or not. We should begin trying to make sure it will be used safely, and not only by the rich.

We should also get ready for the problems and questions gene editing will bring.
Soon enough, doctors will start using CRISPR simply for enhancement. It can be done, and it will be. We need to think about their promise to give us taller, smarter, healthier, cuter, stronger, and more loving children. We need to decide if such changes are worth making.
1 Read the sentence from the section "If We Have The Tool, We Should Use It."

Soon enough, doctors will start using CRISPR simply for enhancement.

What does the author mean by “enhancement”?
(A) experimentation on human children
(B) experimentation on insects and animals
(C) giving children healthier genes so they avoid dangerous diseases
(D) giving children genes to improve characteristics like height and strength

2 Read the sentences from the section "If We Have The Tool, We Should Use It."

Such worries are understandable. However, they are not enough of a reason to block the use of CRISPR.

What is meant by “understandable”?
(A) clear
(B) predictable
(C) reasonable
(D) easy to solve

3 Which of the following is a claim shared by this author and people who are worried about gene editing?
(A) Gene editing might be a risky, dangerous procedure.
(B) Gene editing will not be available to everyone equally, since it will be expensive.
(C) Gene editing is a good idea to help get rid of terrible diseases, even if it creates some problems.
(D) The risk of parents creating superkids is so dangerous that gene editing should be illegal.
Read these selections from the article. Which one uses scientific evidence to support the author's claim?

(A) Genes make us who we are. They are responsible for what we look like.

(B) All tests and experiments so far show there is little risk involved.

(C) The new tool is called CRISPR. It allows scientists to remove and add genes cheaply and easily.

(D) Scientists have long hoped to be able to change the genes in our bodies.