

Jobs, Honors for Stem-Cell Expert By Kristen Philipkoski

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SAN FRANCISCO -- The egg-donor controversy dogging Korean stem-cell researcher extraordinaire Hwang Woo-suk is a "misunderstanding," his spokeswoman said at a black-tie tech event Tuesday evening where the scientist calmly collected an award for his work.

Cameramen from Korean television and an entourage followed Hwang through San Francisco City Hall during a cocktail hour before the [World Technology Network](#) awards gala. Hwang seemed relaxed and smiled for the cameras. The spokeswoman, who did not identify herself, said that Hwang and his colleagues wished to focus on the award for which he was nominated, not the recent scandal surrounding how Hwang obtained human eggs for his research.

"We need to investigate what's happening when we get back," the spokeswoman said, "because obviously there is a misunderstanding. Any statement will come when we return."

The Korean group was apparently in a hurry to do so. WTN awards ceremony organizers rescheduled the evening to announce the winner of the biotechnology category (in which Hwang was a nominee) before dinner so that Hwang and his group could catch a flight home that evening. Hwang won the award and did not mention the scuttlebutt in his acceptance speech.

On Saturday, [Gerald Schatten](#), chairman for research development and professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, announced that he would end his 20-month collaboration with the Korean group because he had reason to believe the stem-cell researchers had misled him regarding the source of the 242 eggs used in his groundbreaking cloning and stem-cell research.

In his speech, Hwang spoke about his desire to move swiftly to treat people who are considered "incurables."

"We are moving ever closer to making stem-cell therapies a reality, and we should not waste another second, because there are families and friends who count every second," he said. "Together I believe we can improve the quality of life for all."

He dedicated the award to his mother, "who is 89 years old, and lives in the town where I grew up. Mom, I hope you enjoy many, many happy and healthy years."

Schatten declined to comment on his break with Hwang. His press office sent a statement which said: "My decision is grounded solely on concerns regarding oocyte donations in Dr. Hwang's research ([reported](#) in 2004). I continue to believe the scientific accomplishments of Prof. Hwang and his team at Seoul National University, including those in which I had been involved (published in *Science* and *Nature* in 2005), are landmark discoveries accelerating biomedical research."

The research in question marked the first stem cells derived from a human clone. A news report in *Nature* raised questions about whether a lower-level researcher in Hwang's lab had donated some of the eggs for the study. Korean regulations prohibit donations from underlings to avoid the appearance of coercion. Hwang has denied the allegations, but Schatten said he had new information that suggested the accusations might be true.

Schatten collaborated with Hwang's lab for two milestone studies, including the first stem cells customized for specific patients and the birth of the first cloned dog, Snuppy, who is featured on the cover of *Time* this week.

Hwang's research has been heralded by scientists worldwide. Researchers in the United States credit at least some of the Koreans' advantage in the field to U.S. [regulations](#) limiting government funding of embryonic stem-cell research.

Now, a shadow has been cast on Hwang's research, and several U.S. labs that planned to collaborate with the Korean lab to form a World Stem Cell Hub have pulled out. The source of human eggs for embryonic stem-cell research has caused concern among people worried that underprivileged women could be coerced into donating eggs for pay, putting their health at risk.

But most attendees at the WTN awards ceremony seemed content to ignore Hwang's troubles, at least for the night, and supporters say Hwang could survive the controversy with continued public support. Korean news publication *Chosun Ilbo* [reported](#) Wednesday that despite the ethical concerns, the country's ruling Uri party will "expedite legislation to facilitate the work of the Seoul Stem Cell Hub run by pioneering geneticist Professor Hwang Woo-suk." The bill would provide \$11.5 million for Hwang's research center.

Stem-cell researcher [Evan Snyder](#), program director of stem cells and regeneration at the Burnham Institute in San Diego, said most of his colleagues are reserving judgment until more information is known. He had just returned from the annual meeting of the [Society for Neuroscience](#) and said Hwang's troubles were not discussed among attendees.

"I think the ethical issues are going to be resolved," said Bernard Siegel, director of

the Genetics Policy Institute, who visited Hwang in Seoul recently for the launch of the World Stem Cell Hub. "I think the public will get an accurate, factual story and I think in the end that the foreign collaborators will probably continue their collaborations. But right now there's a short-term issue that has to be resolved so there won't be doubt about what happened in 2004."



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