

Can't and Won't

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pISSN 2093-2278
eISSN 2093-2286



JPIS >
Journal of Periodontal
& Implant Science

Editorial

J Periodontal Implant Sci 2014;44:49-49
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5051/jpis.2014.44.2.49>

Received: Apr. 3, 2014

Accepted: Apr. 3, 2014

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On January 30 of this year, *Nature* published two breathtaking papers dealing with stem cell research (doi:10.1038/nature12968, doi:10.1038/nature12969). While most contemporary researchers have focused on sophisticated strategies for developing therapies from the stem cells of adults, scholars from the Riken Center for Developmental Biology in Kobe, Japan, and at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School in Boston, announced a notably simpler technique.

According to these papers, they applied various kinds of stress to murine cells and reported that stress by acid bathing endowed the cells with pluripotency. They named the cells obtained from this method "stimulus-triggered acquisition of pluripotency" (STAP) cells. If their method were applicable to adult human cells, their results would be a breakthrough in regenerative medicine, given that the technique provides a simpler source of stem cells than those currently available.

Since then, however, a series of concerns has been raised by researchers worldwide. Some of the figures in the published papers have been called into question, while the body text was found to be similar to a previous article. The major sticking point was the failure of other scientists to replicate their results so far. While separate investigations are underway, Riken has already issued a statement on April 1 that the *Nature* papers were interspersed with critical errors and called for their retraction. Dr. Ryoji Noyori, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist and Riken's president, remarked that the panel's report shows that the research misconduct occurred due to a young researcher's lack of experience and awareness of research ethics, and a lack of leadership and mutual verification among the coauthors. Meanwhile, the lead author, Dr. Haruko Obokata, has refused to retract their papers. In the meantime, Dr. Charles Vacanti, who is Obokata's former mentor at Harvard Medical School and a coauthor on those papers, has publicized his own protocol, while Dr. Kenneth Lee of the Chinese University of Hong Kong has claimed that some version of the STAP method might work.

It remains unclear whether the method for producing STAP cells will be deemed legitimate and the final decision on retraction depends on the authors and *Nature*. But, the situation brings to mind Lydia Davis' recent book entitled *Can't and Won't*. To quote the words of one of Ms. Davis' short stories, "Not Interested": "Please spare me your imagination, I'm so tired of your vivid imagination." Let us get to the truth behind the STAP papers, which should be the foremost interest of the scientific community.

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