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Friday 06 July, 2001

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Allergy Cats

Scientists in the US have recently announced that they are trying to produce genetically-modified cats that will not cause allergies.

The cloned animals would be sold for around \$1000. *BBC Science* reports

Allergy Relief

For the millions of people who suffer allergic reactions to cats there could soon be relief, as scientists in America investigate the possibility of producing allergy-proof cats.

Sneezing, sore eyes, rashes and asthma are just some of the symptoms experienced by people with cat allergies. The problem is thought to be caused by a single protein in the cat's skin and saliva.

Now a company called Transgenic Pets is working in collaboration with cattle cloning expert Professor Jerry Yang of the University of Connecticut, US, aiming to produce genetically modified cats that will not cause allergic reactions.

'According to Professor Yang, an allergen-free cat could be available by the year 2003, costing somewhere in the region of \$1000.'

Problem Protein

The researchers aim to take cat cells and knock out the gene that produces the problem protein, replacing it with an inactive version.

Mutant Mice

Mice are the most regularly modified animals as scientists recognise that they share many of the 30,000 to 40,000 human genes.

In August 2000 animal welfare groups expressed concern after a consortium of British research groups developed 500 new strains of mice that could mimic human health problems.

The amount of discarded animals and the scale of the project worried the groups. From 26,000 mutant mice only 500 made it into the "library" of promising animal models.

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The cell's nucleus will then be put into a cat egg cell, that has had its own genes removed, creating an embryo that can be implanted into a surrogate mother.

The scientists behind the scheme say there should be no concern about the genetic modification, because the cats will, of course, not enter the human food chain.

To allay further public concern the researchers have also said that they will sterilize the genetically modified animals. This also means that the company keeps the monopoly in non-allergenic cats.

Animal Rights Concerns

Campaigners for animal rights have already voiced their concerns, highlighting the potential cruelty involved in the process.

Speaking to BBC News Online, Vicky Robinson of the UK's Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) commented:

'Many of the kittens are likely to die before birth and of those that survive there is the very real possibility that they may have abnormalities that compromise their welfare.'

The plan has also provoked speculation about further genetic modifications aimed at designing pets with specific hair colour, hair length or even behaviour.

However, most animal characteristics depend on far more than one gene, so producing designer pets would be more complicated and difficult than knocking out the single allergy protein.

Cats Reduce Allergies

Meanwhile a new study, carried out by scientists at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta and the Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, Michigan, claims that exposure to cats from a very early age can in fact reduce the risk of allergies.

After carrying out tests to common allergens including cat, dog and dust on 473 children - some of whom had pets up to about seven-years-old - the researchers found those children who had been exposed to pets, had half the number of positive

skin tests compared to those who had not.

Responding to the suggestion that cat exposure could actually reduce allergies a spokesperson for the Cats Protection League said:

'These findings are good news for cats who are all too often seen as the cause of allergic reactions in children rather than a risk reduction factor.'

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