

The Bizarre World of Healthcare (6)

Clone your Pet!

A world shattering business concept undergoes a revamp, assisted by an old acquaintance.

Do you remember Little Nicky? The Californian kitty, born on October 17th, 2004, is the first commercially produced cat clone, created by the US biotech company Genetic Savings & Clone (which closed at the end of 2006, having never really got off the ground).

Little Nicky is still alive and well and could soon have cloned friends in Asia. The South Korean company RNL Bio, Seoul, also dabbles in pet cloning. According to Ra Jeong-Chan, RNL's Chief Executive, they have now obtained their first \$50,000 (about €34,000) order. A Californian pit bull terrier is set to rise from the dead. "If the biological material we're working with is viable for cloning purposes, we can begin [cloning] in April," Ra Jeong-Chan told a Korean newspaper. Media all around the world jumped on the news and published extensive front page stories, complete with pictures of cute pit bull terrier puppies.

RNL Bio is connected with the Seoul National University stem cell research lab (ASCR) that produced the first cloned dog (a male Afghan hound puppy named Snuppy) in 2005. But wait a moment! Doesn't that particular lab ring a bell?

Yes, indeed. The ASCR was the origin of the 2005 fraud scandal surrounding South Korean Hwang Woo-Suk, the national scientific hero who was immortalised on stamps and considered one of the world's pioneering experts in stem cell research. Soon after *Time* magazine named Hwang one of its "People Who Mattered 2004", the biomedical scientist was exposed as a data faker and notorious liar (though the cloning of Snuppy was later shown to be genuine).

RNL Bio will charge about \$150,000 (€102,000) for dog cloning. However, it's possible to save money in certain instances. Since RNL Bio's first customer (a Californian woman who was the deceased pit bull terrier's owner) is allowing her case to be publicised, the company is charging her a special price of \$50,000. The company didn't disclose whether this special offer will be extended, nor whether they're planning to offer other unmissable deals (cloning midget dogs for half the price, perhaps?).

Anyway, the RNL Bio clone venture promises to be thrilling. Will it work? Is the notorious Hwang Woo-Suk involved, and, if so, will he once again fool the public and his customers? Is there a guarantee for basic dog functions such as barking, having a wet tongue and always biting the postman?

More questions arise. Is RNL Bio considering updates? "Top dog 2.0" versions, equipped with superior abilities such as catching thieves or delivering the morning newspaper dry and crease-free would surely be big sellers.

"Is there a guarantee for basic dog functions such as barking, having a wet tongue and always biting the postman?"



Back to our celebrity pit bull. Even though ear tissue from the terrier was preserved at a US biotech lab before its death, the chance of success is low. Head cloner Ra Jeong-Chan estimates it at about 25 percent (leading observers to question whether such a novel technique's chance of success can be estimated at all).

In any case, the whole pet cloning scheme seems decidedly fishy. Firstly, take a look at RNL Bio's chief scientist, Lee Byeong-chun. The veterinary professor once worked with the swindler Hwang Woo-Suk and is on trial for this reason. Has Lee really enhanced the company's ethical and scientific standards?

Secondly, remember that Genetic Savings & Clone spent seven years and more than \$19 million in their attempt to clone a dog (and, in spite of everything, failed). It's not clear whether RNL Bio can (or wants) do better with only \$50,000, or, later, with \$150,000.

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