The researcher’s revenge

What drove former MIT associate professor James Sherley to fight embryonic stem cell studies?

By Alex Beam
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If you have been following the latest stem cell brouhaha, you know that a federal judge just threw a monkey wrench into hundreds of millions of dollars of ongoing research at MIT, Harvard, and across the country. Press coverage has been remarkably restrained in describing the prime mover behind this litigation, Dr. James Sherley, a researcher at the Boston Biomedical Research Institute in Waltham.

Sherley is portrayed as a “man of faith” who is opposed to human embryo stem cell research because the embryo is part of the chain of life. But I have another theory. I think it is quite possible that Sherley is a histrionic, aggrieved, and vengeful man who is striking back — successfully — at the academic biomedical complex that humiliated him just a few years ago.

Some background: Sherley went nuclear in 2007 when MIT denied him tenure in its biological engineering department. He staged a 12-day hunger strike and repeatedly accused MIT administrators of racism. (Sherley is African-American.) Either he would get tenure, “or I will die defiantly,” he wrote at the time. Such experts in biology as Noam Chomsky, Junot Diaz, and Mel King helped stir the pot on his behalf. In a break from standard practice, MIT disclosed details of his tenure review, which were quite unflattering to Sherley. So is his anti-stem-cell suit payback? Some researchers I spoke with said maybe, although no one would speak on the record. Sherley’s lawyer, Steven Aden of the Alliance Defense Fund, won’t let his client speak to reporters, and he calls my hypothesis “wrong-headed.” “Dr. Sherley is an eminent and well-respected researcher,” Aden told me. “Those events occurred in the past. He and MIT have parted company, and there are no hard feelings on Dr. Sherley’s part.”

Aden advanced a curious — and again, successful — argument in Sherley’s case, asserting that his client would suffer “irreparable harm” if the National Institutes of Health funded embryonic stem cell research, and not the adult stem cell research that Sherley works on. But shouldn’t the NIH fund the best research, not the research that some judge deems to be politically correct? Aden said Sherley has received NIH funding in the past, and had a grant denied around the time the lawsuit was filed. “I think it’s a mistake to conclude that there are pecuniary motives in this lawsuit,” he said, “because there aren’t any.”
boo over at the august New England Journal of Medicine. Five letters — the prefix “radio” — were inadvertently omitted from a 10-page article called “Early-Stage Hodgkin’s Lymphoma,” because of a production error. The problem is, the error changed the description of the therapy Dr. James Armitage was writing about. Every time he meant to write “radiotherapy,” the NEJM wrote “therapy” — e.g., “The incidence of stroke also rises in patients who receive therapy in the neck and mediastinum.”

Perhaps you know the old joke: Lawyers watch their mistakes go to jail, while doctors bury theirs. The NEJM takes accuracy very seriously, so it will be sending a corrected reprint to all of the magazine’s 150,000 print subscribers. (The error has been fixed at the NEJM website.) Imagine if we sent out a new newspaper every time I made a mistake. The logistics are too staggering to contemplate.

Department of Faint Praise

Many years ago, I had to admit that Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz’s first novel, “The Advocate’s Devil,” was not the worst book ever written. Although freighted down with by-the-numbers sex moments and the odd spelling lapse, “The plot is pretty darned good,” I wrote.

Publishers Weekly recently reviewed “The Trials of Zion,” Dershowitz’s third novel, due in October: “Those looking for a read that offers interesting legal issues and clever courtroom action and don’t mind clunky dialogue and perfunctory thriller plotting might enjoy the result,” the magazine opined.

Clunky dialogue and perfunctory plotting? Sounds Ludlum-esque! The Amazon pre-sales must be enormous.

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