

## Japan stem cell scientist readies to fight fabrication claim

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Haruko Obokata, Riken Institute researcher, at a press conference at the Riken center in Kobe in Hyogo prefecture on January 28, 2014

A young female researcher is preparing to fight claims that her groundbreaking stem cell study was fabricated, her lawyer said Tuesday, as Japan's male-dominated scientific establishment circled its wagons.

Haruko Obokata, 30, was admitted to hospital on Monday because her "mental and physical condition is unstable", lawyer Hideo Miki told reporters.

But an official at his office said she is planning to hold a news conference on Wednesday in the western city of Osaka despite advice from her doctor, Jiji Press reported.

Obokata was feted by Japan's media after unveiling research that appeared to show a relatively simple way to convert adult cells into a kind of stem cell.

Such a cell has the potential to become differentiated into the various specialised cells that make up the brain, heart, kidneys and other organs.

That could significantly help the search for a ready supply of transplant tissues, offering much-needed progress in the battle against all manner of degenerative diseases.

A rash of magazine pieces and television shows celebrated a rare success for a young Japanese woman in a field largely dominated by middle-aged men.

Journalists played up Obokata's quirky feminine touches, including her shunning of the traditional white laboratory coat in favour of the kind of apron commonly worn by Japanese housewives.



Riken Institute researcher Haruko Obokata at her laboratory in Kobe in Hyogo prefecture on January 28, 2014

But weeks after her team's research appeared, questions began to emerge over their methodology, with other scientists unable to repeat the experiments and claims that images used in public presentations were doctored.

The respected Riken Institute, which sponsored the study, launched an inquiry into the credibility of the data used to support the paper, which was also published in the prestigious scientific journal *Nature*.

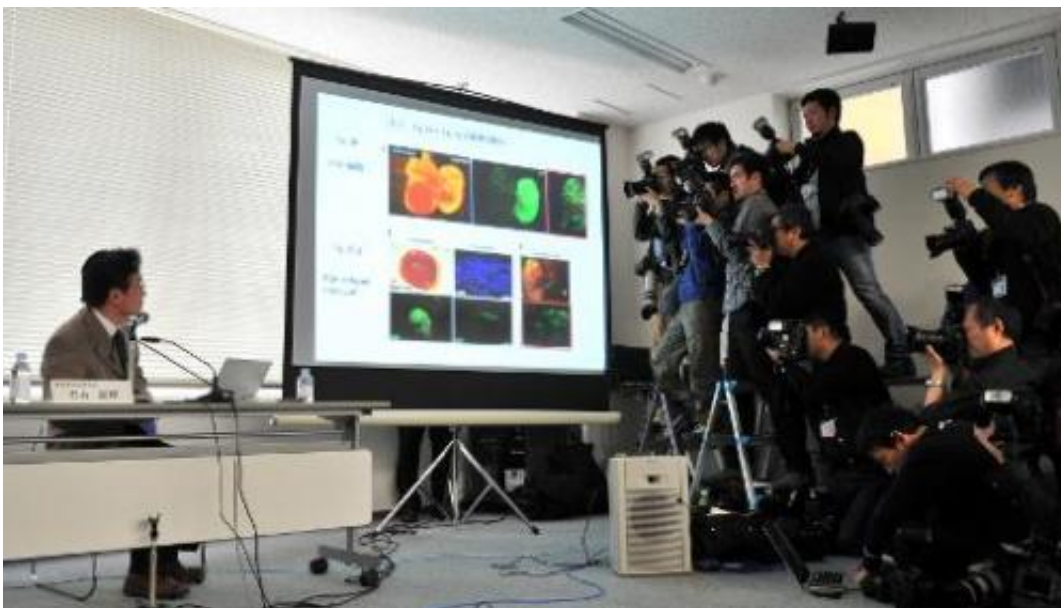
Last week Riken declared the study was flawed and that results had been

confected.

This "amounts to phoney research or fabrication" by Obokata, Shunsuke Ishii, head of Riken's probe committee, told a press conference last week.

The institute this week announced it was launching a year-long study to try to establish whether or not the particular kind of stem cell can be created in the way Obokata had described.

It confirmed Tuesday that she had filed a formal complaint.



Shunsuke Ishii, head of Riken's probe committee, at a press conference in Tokyo on March 14, 2014

Riken institute head Ryoji Noyori, who jointly won the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 2001, said in a statement he would "rigorously punish relevant people after procedures in a disciplinary committee".

Observers suggest Obokata is likely to catch the worst of any punishment, with her mentors—who have apologised for "not offering enough support to young researchers"—expected to receive no more than a slap on the wrist.

The case has raised questions over the alacrity with which the young woman appears to have been jettisoned by the scientific establishment, amid suspicions she has been made a scapegoat.

If her Wednesday press conference goes ahead, it would be Obokata's first public appearance since the furore erupted.

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