BBC NEWS

Synthetic life 'no terror threat'

By Cristina Jimenez
Science reporter

Synthetic biology can help in the fight against emerging infections, rather than aid the design of bioweapons, controversial scientist Craig Venter has told reporters.

The US scientist, who led the private sector race to map the human genome, used a briefing in central London to allay fears that his work may fall into the wrong hands.

Critics of Dr Venter's research, which aims to design the world's first synthetic life, have expressed concern.

They say that artificial microbes may have dangerous consequences, such as either escaping into the environment or being used to manufacture bioweapons.

"If Venter succeeds in creating a working bacteria then he also lifts the lid on creating bacterial bioweapons, such as anthrax, in the near future," said Jim Thomas of the ETC Group, a Canadian campaign group that has concerns over the development of genetic technology.

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> Dr Craig Venter

"An equally real concern in the longer term is bio-error, the synthetic creation of organisms that escape out of our control," he added.

Dr Venter insisted that such worries about synthetic organisms were unfounded.

He maintained that antibiotic-resistant infections, such as MRSA, were much more of a threat.

According to the maverick scientist, synthetic biology could provide the most effective way of stopping infections in developing countries, such as malaria, and emerging drug-resistant superbugs.

"In the US, MRSA kills more people than Aids," he said.

Campaigners say that there are currently no international laws or oversight mechanisms to assess the safety of synthetic organisms.

They suggest that an international process is needed to put in place controls before anything is commercialised.

Dr Venter defended himself against any claims that he was exploiting the human genome for financial gain.

"If you look at the record, my institution has no human gene patents, yet my biggest critics do," he said. "The Human Gene Project has human gene patents."

In an effort to explain why his work had attracted so much critical attention, he pointed out that a similar controversy occurred at the beginning of the molecular biology era.

He said: "When there is a big shift of knowledge, we go through a cycle of fear, in which people are afraid of the unknown."