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Would You Clone Your Dog for \$100,000? Should You Clone Your Dog?

Chris Hall

If watching the last three seasons of [Orphan Black](#) has taught me nothing else, it's that elections for suburban school boards have an unexpected amount of ruthless manipulation, backstabbing, and illegal drug-dealing happening behind the scenes. But it's also taught me that clones of yourself are just more trouble than they're worth. True, I probably should have picked that up in the scores of science-fiction novels and movies I consumed in my youth, but three seasons of Tatiana Maslany being pursued by religious fanatics and corporate profiteers certainly helps to drive the lesson home.





Clone Club: It's not as much fun as you think. (Photo courtesy BBC America)

But what about cloning your dog? This isn't a purely theoretical question; if you happen to have a spare \$100,000 lying around the house, there's a lab in South Korea that will make a clone of your favorite dog. [NPR recently did a story on Philip and Paula Dupont](#), a Louisiana couple whose two dogs, Ken and Henry, were cloned from Melvin, a previous dog they had.

At first glance, the idea is kind of touching. Who wouldn't want to bring back a beloved pet in some form? Philip, a veterinarian himself, speaks lovingly of Melvin: "He was different," he told NPR. "Of all the dogs I had, he was completely different."

It wasn't love at first sight, though: Philip almost had Melvin put to sleep. Not because of any disease or behavior problems, but because Melvin turned out not to be the purebred that the Duponts wanted. They thought that for \$50, they were getting a [Catahoula Leopard Dog](#), but that turned out to be only partly true; Melvin was actually part [Doberman](#) and part Catahoula.

"I paid \$50 for him," Phillip told NPR. "But I wasn't going to return it. I thought for a while I was going to put him to sleep. Turned out to be the best dog I ever owned."

That line is pretty much where the story of the Duponts and their cloned dogs loses any possibility of being kind of weird but

touching, and I start to wonder if they should have dogs at all — not to mention practicing veterinary medicine.

But even in a best-case scenario — where I was able to go with the “weird but touching” storyline — there are a lot of arguments against dog lovers using the cloning process to produce a reasonable facsimile of their beloved canine companion. The process itself is far from perfect. Most cloned animals tend to be sickly and short-lived. Ken and Henry weren’t the first attempt at making clones of Melvin. At least one puppy was born before them and quickly died from distemper.

The other thing is that cloning parallels some of the problems that we commonly talk about with puppy mills and professional breeders, but on a more high-tech level. It’s not simply a process of taking some cells and letting them divide in a petri dish. Besides the dog who’s being cloned, you need to have a dog to donate the egg cell, which is then emptied of the original DNA and implanted into the uterus of a surrogate mother. All of this involves a lot of surgery and medical care that’s not necessarily fun for the dogs. [Insoo Hyun](#), a bioethicist at Case Western Reserve University, put it succinctly for NPR:

“If you love dogs, and you really want to have your companion animal cloned, you really do need to take very seriously the health and well-being of all the dogs that would be involved in this process.” He goes on to make an even better, just as obvious point: “I think there are probably better ways to spend \$100,000 if you really care about animals.”

Then there's the facility itself: Sooam Biotech is the only firm in the world that offers this service. Most of its customers are just like the Duponts: Wealthy people who want to resurrect their pets in some form. The founder of Sooam Biotech, Dr. Hwang Woo Suk, [has a poor reputation among his peers](#). Until 2006, Dr. Hwang was considered a pioneer in the field of genetics. He was a hero not only in scientific research, but to the people of South Korea. The government had given him the title of Supreme Scientist.

All of that disappeared when he was found to have faked the research that allegedly showed that he had cloned human embryos and withdrawn stem cells from them. He was also charged with ethics violations for extracting egg cells from his own graduate students. Many South Koreans let go of their hero worship reluctantly, but he's long since been considered a disgrace by both the government and scientists. "I'm a little bit wary of the idea that he's still trying to do research and publish in scientific journals," Hyun told NPR. "And some have even suggested that over time, he may make a comeback in the human research arena. I just don't think someone like him can be trusted to follow the rules appropriately."

That's not a small thing; following the rules in medicine is essential for both ethics and health. It's easy to understand the grief that drives people to clone their dogs, but there's a point where the cost of easing that grief just becomes too high. The \$100,000 price tag is only the merest sliver of that cost.

Right now, cloning pets is a novelty, a vanity of the rich who can't

accept the reality of death. But we will have to grapple with these ethical questions more and more as the science advances. When that happens, I hope that the questions can be answered by better people than the Duponts and better scientists than Dr. Hwang.

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