

Nobel laureate weighs in on the future of genetic engineering

Venkatraman Ramakrishnan says it is important to have public debates on latest developments in biotech

DNA EXCLUSIVE

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Boston: Venkatraman 'Venki' Ramakrishnan, the Indian born structural biologist who shared the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2009 with two other scientists cautioned against the risks associated with recent developments in biotechnology. Ramakrishnan spoke about the issue at the annual meeting of the American Association for Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Boston.

"Many of the genetic cells could be treated by removing cells from the body and modifying it," he said while addressing one of the major ethical concerns related to genetic engineering. "Treating a well-known genetic disease is something that many people would agree with. It gets trickier when someone says, 'I consider being a brown guy in today's atmosphere a problem and don't want my children to go through that'."

Currently the President of the Royal Society of London, he said, "I grew up in India where lot of people still don't have access to enough food, and cancer survival rates remain one of the lowest in the world. But in UK and US people have far greater access to healthcare." He added, "When we decide what to do with the technology that we have, we need to consider not only what we can do, but also what we should do." He also said that the benefits of new technology should not be limited to a few rich countries.

Genetic engineering remains a debated topic among the scientists as well as the general people. "We



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now have a much wider range of tools at our disposal. They are making genetic manipulation faster, easier and simpler," Ramakrishnan said referring to the easier production of insulin, vaccines and the availability of genetically modified crops that give a better yield.

The Nobel laureate was of the opinion that scientists need to address the concerns that the people have and that there must be public debate along with robust science.

"If you were to say wipe out mosquitoes, many people won't complain. This may not necessarily be the right thing to do," he explained.

"There is a natural worry if you would be able to reverse it if there was some kind of problem," he said. Referring to the food shortage in many of the developing countries including India, he pointed out that technology like genetic engineering of crops could help us increase the yield.