

PRODUCT EGG: EGG SELLING IN AN AUSTRIAN IVF CLINIC

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Synopsis — Reproductive technologies do not only concern women who are involuntarily childless, as the following interview with an “egg donor” illustrates. The woman we spoke to describes her experiences with the fertility drug regimens, the payment involved, her motivation and attitude towards other reproductive technologies. Our title comes from her comment, “The doctors pay for the product egg.”

Synopsis — Reproduktionstechnologien betreffen nicht nur Frauen mit unerfülltem Kinderwunsch wie das folgende Interview mit einer Eispenderin aufzeigt. Die Frau, die wir interviewten, beschrieb ihre Erfahrungen mit der Hormonbehandlung, die Tatsache, dass sie dafür bezahlt wurde, ihre Motivierung zur Eispende und ihre Einstellung gegenüber anderen Reproduktionstechnologien. Unser Titel kommt von einem Kommentar von ihr: “Die Aerzte bezahlen für das Produkt Ei.”

Reproductive technologies such as IVF do not only concern women who are involuntarily childless. The following interview with a so-called egg donor explores the ways in which her body is used or farmed and the nature of the commercial transaction involved. The term donor obscures both these aspects.

The purchasers run an Institute for Reproductive Endocrinology and IVF in a Viennese “nobel district” (a wealthy, beautiful neighbourhood). The heads of the Institute, Dr. Wilfred Feichtinger and Dr. Peter Kemeter, are both very successful and well-known IVF specialists.

The price for one treatment is between ös 35,000 and 70,000 (US \$3,000 and \$6,000) depending on whether donor eggs and/or sperm are used.¹ Clients are mainly foreigners from Arab countries, West-Germany and The Netherlands. The doctors refused to give us an interview for fear of being misrepresented.

Where did you get the information about the possibility of donating (selling) eggs?

In the Viennese Public Hospital where I have participated in various drug experiments, I got the telephone number of the Institute. Dr. Feichtinger gave me a short description of the process and we arranged an appointment. Within the last two years I have made 5 egg donations.

Are there any selection criteria and preliminary examinations for the donation?

During an introductory talk he explained further details and tried to estimate my intelligence. I guess you need a certain level of intelligence. Other criteria are age (not older than 35 years), an AIDS test and a gynaecological examination. You also should not be overweight. When he took my personal dates for his card I gave him brief information about childhood illnesses and eventually hereditary diseases. Also, I was informed about possible risks and dangers of such an operation (unintentional cutting of the intestine, injuries to the intestine or uterus which may need surgical treatment). I signed consent forms only after the third or fourth treatment. [The doctors forgot to ask her to sign a consent form the first two times.]

Can you describe the exact protocol followed by the doctors and the chemical therapy?

The month before the operation I have to take the pill, Mavelon, a single phased pill with a high dosage of desogestrel (0.15 mg) and ethinylestradiol (0.03 mg). (This pill is produced by Orgamen in the Netherlands and is distributed by the Austrian firm, Bender, an off-shoot of the German firm Boeringer Ingerlheim.) On the second day of my menstruation I start taking the hormone and stimulation preparation called

Clomiphene orally, which I have to take until the day of the operation (see Klein & Rowland this issue). At the same time I get injections of ovum-maturing hormones four or five times every second day. One week before the expected ovulation date, ultrasound tests are given daily to watch for ovulation. Four days before the operation I have to bring urine to the clinic daily, which I must collect every twelve hours, and during the last two days every three hours (and also during the night).

Blood examinations follow during the whole treatment. One and a half days before the calculated ovulation time I get another injection late in the evening to initiate the ovulation. For the operation, which always takes place in the morning, a vaginal scanner² is used. It is up to me whether to have a narcotic-substitute sleeping pill (actually an injection) or not. Painful lavages are made (they flush the follicles with fluid to try to loosen the egg). If you get a sleeping pill (injection) you should not drive home without company.

Did you recognize any physical or psychic effects caused by the treatment?

It was inconvenient for me to coordinate my cycle and ovulation with the cycle of the receiving woman. I did not notice any irregularities of my cycle caused by the hormones. Besides, I always take the pill Mavelon as a contraceptive now. I feel a swelling of my uterus, pressure and tension as well as cramps caused by the stimulation, but maybe I recognize these feelings only because I watch my body more than before the treatments.

How much did you get paid per operation and how does the financial transaction take place?

After the procedure I get ös 10,000 (US \$800) no matter how many eggs they take out. If there are no matured eggs or they miss the ovulation I get no money except expenses like tramfare. But this has not happened to me so far. The doctors pay for the product 'egg'.

How do the doctors behave toward you as an egg donor and how would you describe the clinical atmosphere?

The doctors are always kind and friendly. I never feel that they are treating me differently than their well-paying IVF patients. I was very

surprised at the personal climate in the clinic. Occasionally, I got in touch with some of the patients in the waiting room but I set a high value on remaining anonymous. For this reason I refused Dr. Feichtinger's proposal to take pictures of me.

What is your personal point of view concerning the new reproductive technologies; do you see any connection between egg donation and surrogacy? Could you imagine undergoing IVF?

Personally, surrogacy does not come into question because I have a child of my own and I think it is difficult to hand over a child whom you have felt already. As well, I would not enter an IVF programme. Rather, I would consider adopting a child, although I am able to have my own children. The thing disturbing me is the high price for IVF and donated eggs, which only a certain class is able to pay. Besides, I consider it unfair that IVF is not available for single women.

How does your circle of friends and acquaintances react to your source of income as an egg donor?

So far there are two kinds of reactions. Either they have ethical objections and consider it a too heavy and dangerous physical operation, or they react euphorically and want to try it out immediately, without information about details and conditions. My friend who donates his sperm occasionally (for ös 500; US \$40) got a bit jealous because of my income. But of course egg and sperm donation are not comparable. I have recommended this money making opportunity to some friends.

What was and is your personal motivation for such an operation?

To help infertile women is more subordinate to me; in the first place I want to earn money. As I live on welfare I am able to finance my special wishes, like holidays, by egg donation.

I am aware of the fact that the doctors profit by the financial situation of women but somehow everybody sells him or herself and this way seems to me easier and more comfortable. Since I am donating eggs I also have examinations during my cycle, the examination entails measurements of the mucous secretions of the vagina and of the blood supply of the uterus, for which I get ös 1000, (US \$80). In May I will have my next egg

donation.

Thank you for the interview.

Ed. Note: We publish this article not because we agree that women should sell their eggs, but because we think it illustrates well the medical utilisation of women.

ENDNOTES

1. In Austria it is illegal to sell body parts. For instance, kidneys can only be donated in public hospitals and without any commercial benefit for any parties involved. Sperm donors sometimes are paid (ös 500, US\$40), but sometimes are not. There is no definite legal position on the selling of eggs.

2. The vaginal scanner was developed by an Austrian enterprise which produces instruments for ultrasonic diagnosis. It consists of a plastic bar, which is inserted into the vagina and sends out short ultrasonic pulses to the ovary and measures the echo. A computer analyses the signals and an exact picture of the egg(s) will appear on the screen. With a needle, the doctor punctures the egg(s) through the vagina.