



ENTREPRENEURS

Fertility business: The entrepreneur who's created 60,000 kids

EDITOR'S BLOG: Assisted conception is now a multi-billion pound global industry and people have offspring in ways hardly dreamed of 40 years ago.

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I've been to some interesting businesses in my career but never one whose

key asset is 180 litres of deep-frozen human sperm. The liquid nitrogen wafts about when you open the vat lids. This was at the Cryos lab in Aarhus, Denmark's second city. Cryos came about in 1981 after Ole Schou, then a graduate student in the city's business school, had a bizarre dream. In this nocturnal vision he saw an icy-blue sea and, caught in the waves, hundreds of frozen sperm. It's not what the careers advisors would recommend, but it was enough to get him started on his life's work.

Cryos is today the world's largest sperm bank. Schou estimates that his business has been responsible for more than 60,000 births including 5,000 in the UK. He started off by selling his sperm to infertile heterosexual couples where the guy was suffering from infertility. But the massive growth over the last decade has been among single women in their 30s and 40s who have grown fed up with trying to find a partner and decide to embark on the great journey that is parenthood alone. The other major customers are lesbian couples.

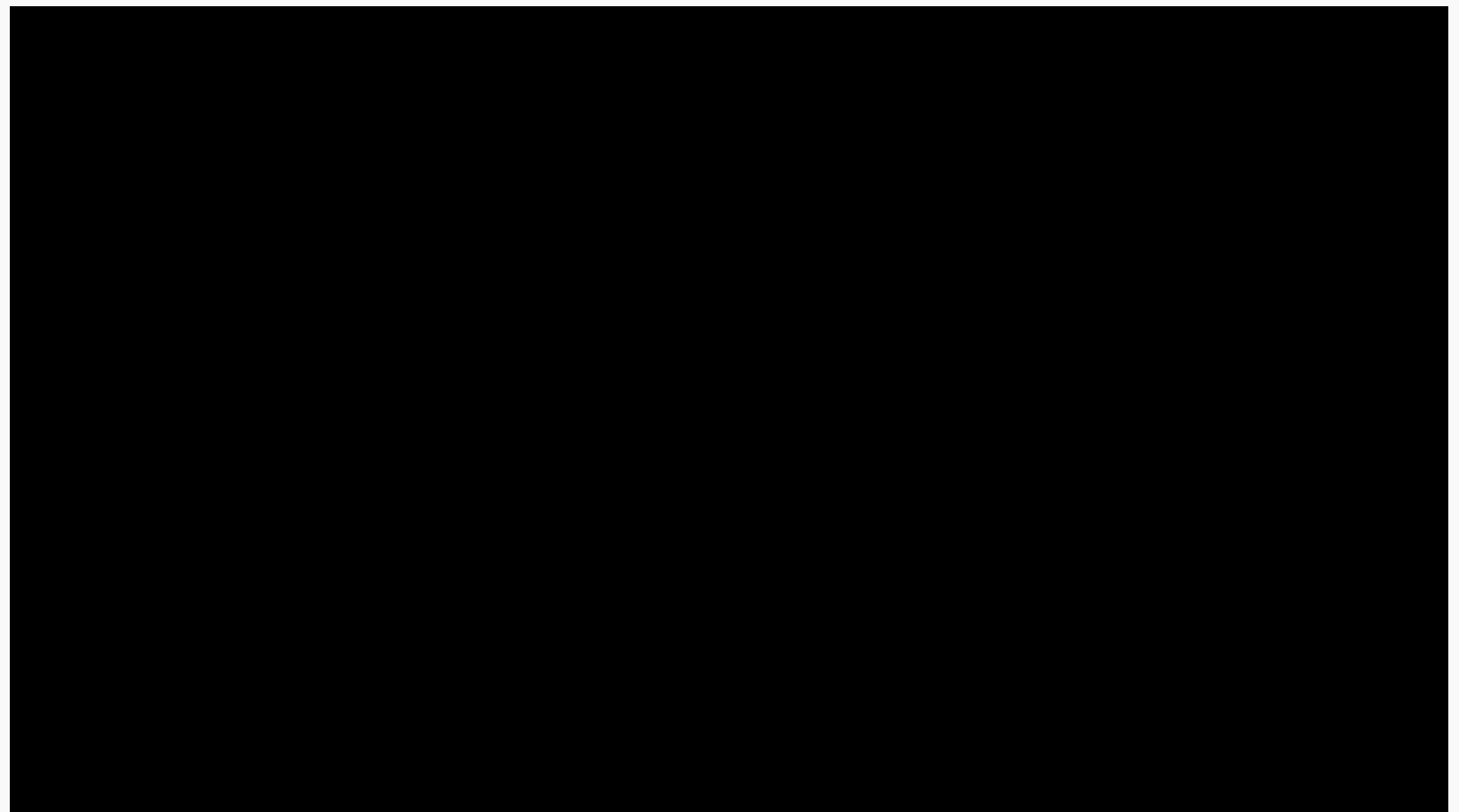
Donors receive around £50 per visit, and two straws of sperm cost 606 euros from a non-anonymous donor and 190 euros if the donor remains unknown to the purchaser. They are freighted all over the world in armoured, protective containers and it's actually possible for customers to thaw the product out at home and use it themselves. Prices are strong because the demand for sperm far exceeds supply. Cryos' exports to the UK have been boosted by the rules here, which have forbidden anonymity since 2005. Consequently persuading British men to make the altruistic gesture is very difficult indeed.

Schou is proud of the very high quality of his product which he describes as 'explosive.' Many would-be donors fall at the various hurdles as their

offerings are examined under the microscope. Schou is now 62 but remains highly entrepreneurial - he's turned down many offers from pharma companies for his business - and has opened another clinic in Florida. (You cannot export Danish sperm to the US because of strict regulations surrounding the importation of live tissue, human or animal.)

But there is a fly in the ointment. The problem with Cryos's Danish sperm is that there is very little diversity. (There was a kerfuffle a few years back when it was announced they had enough donations from redheads which created an outcry from that put-upon subgroup.) The donors and their DNA are almost all white and blond with blue eyes. If Schou wants to make customers across the world he has to get supplies from many other ethnic groups and religions.

It's hard for many of us - especially the guys - to suppress sniggers when thinking about all this. People of a certain age will recall Woody's Allen's appearance as a sperm in the 60s film 'Everything You Always wanted To Know about Sex (and never dared to ask)'.



Laughing apart, the global fertility business is in boom at the moment. Schou is now a big player in an industry which is worth fifteen billion pounds a year and it's growing at a rate of 9% annually. This is despite its many legal and ethical complexities - Lord Winston, an early pioneer of IVF, has described the industry as a 'jungle.'

In the UK the cash-strapped NHS varies enormously in both the quality and

availability of its fertility services. Sixty per cent is carried out in private clinics. One of the most successful businesses in the IVF game is the Assisted Reproduction & Gynaecology Centre, owned and run by Dr Mohammed Taranissi in Upper Wimpole Street.

Taranissi is a legendary workaholic, doing seven day weeks and never getting out of his pale blue surgical scrubs. His office is piled high with files. He's appeared in the Sunday Times Rich List and was named by Tatler magazine as one of the top five fertility gurus in the business.

I've made a BBC Radio programme about the booming fertility industry which you can hear here

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