

CORE European Seminar  
Human Egg Trading and the Exploitation of Women

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I come here today to bring to your attention a very pressing matter, regarding egg donation, egg harvesting and especially a very growing business in Romania, egg commerce.

As you maybe are aware, last year in my country, some medical clinics were involved in egg trading, taking advantage of numerous women, tempted to gain some easy money, by selling their eggs. Unfortunately, there have been no easy aspects to this story.

The reason why I adopt a critical approach, during this Seminar, is because the people involved in the exploited part of the business, and I am referring especially to the two girls whose interests I represent, were never listened to, counselled or helped, by the institutions that should have done this.

The two girls Alina N. and Raluca T., found out from a colleague at work, that they could make some money (approximately 250 US dollars), by simply donating eggs (oocytes). They were contacted by the clinic representatives and started injection treatment with „Decapeptyl CR” and „Menopur” for ovarian stimulation in order to produce eggs. Eggs were collected.

What happened to Alina and Raluca?

**Alina** is 19 years old, single, planning to marry this summer. She has limited financial resources and a minimal education. Lack of money drew her to egg donation as a way to cover the expenses in organizing her wedding.

She found out about the Global Art Clinic (located in Bucharest, Olimpului Street, nr. 47, sector 4) from a colleague at work, who also donated eggs. Both were working at the time in a mattress factory in Bucharest.

Following the egg harvesting, Alina has had serious health problems. She was hospitalized for 14 days and she received medical leave for 30 days. She

suffered great pain, strong inflammation of the abdomen (she looked like a pregnant woman in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> month), bleeding, her menstruation is still abnormal. She had frequent states of nausea and vomiting, lack of calcium, cardiac instability, depressions. She has still not recovered properly.

The people from the clinic, despite a contractual responsibility to take care of her if any complications arose, completely ignored her. When she was hospitalized at the University Hospital in Bucharest, the doctor who saw her said: *, If you have continued like this for a short time longer you could have died.'*

The other young Romanian woman is **Raluca**. She is 24 and has a daughter aged 4. Like Alina she comes from a very poor background with limited education. Both of them barely understand written and spoken Romanian, certainly not sufficient to understand complex medical terms. Raluca works in the same factory as Alina. She donated three times, starting in January 2004.

She had for the most part the same medical problems as Alina; furthermore she had breast nodules, which appeared after the second donation. It seems that she can still have children, though this is not sure yet.

#### Focus on the clinics and procedures

The clinics are situated in a luxury area of Bucharest, have an internal and external video surveillance, with a bodyguard at the entrance door. No one can enter if they are not known by at least one of the employees. Everything is secretive and based on the law of silence. The basic rule is *"no questions"* and *"don't create problems"*.

They followed a 15 days treatment cycle, being injected with a substance whose name they were never told, for stimulating their ovaries to produce many more eggs than would normally develop. They are also told that the eggs would be lost anyway during the period of menstruation, and they would be fine and have nothing to worry about.

After the stimulation treatment, they were completely anaesthetized for the extracting procedures, so that they will never know exactly what really happens to them. Extraction lasts between 30 and 40 minutes, after which they are taken to a recovery room and this is the moment when they are given the concluding contract to sign. After another short period, they are given the money and sent home, with no concern as to whether the girls are feeling well or not.

After the donation, if the girls are in need of any support or medical help, suddenly, all doors are closed; no one answers their phone calls and no one can enter the building. Even the Romanian authorities had great difficulty in undertaking their investigations when they eventually decided to do so.

Please bear in mind that the full procedure of implanting a fertilised egg, costs that mother somewhere around 11.000 to 13.000 US dollars. Think then of the profit from Alina, for example, from whom were harvested 20 eggs. The girls, as we said, are given only 250 dollars. The rest of the money goes to the clinics.

### Owner of Clinics – Dr Ilya Barr

The clinics, Global Art and Global Med Rom, are a part of an International Chain which is directed by an Israeli doctor called Ilya Barr, in association with the *International Fertility Medical Center* ([www.global-ivf.com](http://www.global-ivf.com)). As far as we could find out, the clinics have as the single stakeholder another firm from the financial tax haven of the Virgin Islands, named Raine Services Ltd. This is why I stated at the beginning of my speech that this is a spreading business.

Dr Ilya Barr stated in a BBC interview that **“the main reason for creating such a clinic is because the requirements in terms of donation are minimal.”** There are two other Israeli doctors present at the clinic, namely Herman Butnaru and Hof Yaacov.

### Dr Ghionescu

The doctor who supervised and performed the treatment, including the egg harvesting, on Alina and Rulaca is Ioana Mary Louciene Ghionescu and she is a Romanian doctor. She introduced herself to the girls and presented a business card as a specialist doctor in reproductive medicine, though on her medical license, issued by the Romanian Doctors Association, it is **clearly** stated that she is a general practitioner, thus not having a specialization in reproductive medicine. Despite this on the website: [www.global-ivf.com](http://www.global-ivf.com), at the section: *“Our management”* the same doctor Ghionescu is identified as a *“reproductive medicine specialist”*.

Following our numerous efforts, Dr Ghionescu was banned from practising medicine, by the Disciplinary Commission of the Doctors Association, but **sadly only for one year**. She could have been suspended for life.

This is the only action which has been taken against any medical personnel at the clinic.

### The contract

This was a very small punishment, considering that Alina was basically forced to sign a contract assuming the entire responsibility regarding the medical procedures and the negative effects that might follow as a result, even though **she was not told what the negative effects might be.**

The contract also stipulated that the girls would never go to another doctor to be treated, if they had health problems. Also they had to agree not to divulge to any Romanian authority what had happened in that clinic, to refrain from launching any legal action against the clinic, regardless of the side-effects of the procedures and not to ask for the opinion of another doctor or medical institution in relationship to health problems resulting from the donation procedure.

### Romanian Law

All these provisions **are abusive and against the Romanian law.**

Law No. 46/2003 for example, regarding the rights of the patient, states very clearly that: the patient **has the right to be informed with regard to his own health, of the proposed medical interventions and the potential risks of each procedure,.....has the right to a second medical opinion,.....the doctor has the duty to explain to the patient clearly and avoiding specific medical terms.**

Furthermore, Law No. 306/2004 concerning the role of the doctor sets out very clearly the obligations of the doctor, which were seriously disregarded by doctor Ghionescu and the rest of the medical personnel in the clinic.

### Our efforts to defend Alina and Raluca

Romanian legislation does not sanction directly the trade or the donation of eggs for money, as in the case of organs and tissues.

Our legal action was to file, in the name of both girls, complaints against all the doctors and the nurses who took part at those extractions. This is currently in the fifth month of investigations and does not show any sign yet of being ready and being sent to the Prosecutors.

The complaint contains accuses regarding:

- physically harming the two women
- fraud regarding the false medical claims of Dr. Ioana Ghionescu
- claiming authorization for practicing reproductive medicine
- practicing reproductive medicine, without proper authorization.

At the beginning when Alina, and later Raluca, decided to talk and to expose the clinics and the so-called doctors, we were supported in by many people, by the media, and including the Health Secretary of State. But as time passed, everyone turned their attention to other problems, "more urgent", such as floods, political misunderstandings, and the crisis of the Romanian journalists kidnapped in Iraq.

We did manage to present our case on a live TV talk show, in prime time, and we were stunned to find out how many women came on air and spoke of having the same problem with the same clinics. But again unfortunately, as far as media interest is concerned, this proved to be only another subject that raises the rating and went no further.

The fear of being identified in the public arena, meant that other women who had been victimised were not willing to join our legal action, against a very powerful and influential profession, that of the doctors.

During the investigations, one of the girls, Alina, was sent for a medical examination, at the National Institute of Legal Medicine that declined the police request, saying that they do not have the needed experts to perform such examination. We were referred instead to a well-known Romanian medic, whose field of activity is gynaecology and especially vitro fertilization. I ask you? Will a doctor, whose fame and income is based on egg donation and egg harvesting, say that a person suffered because of these procedures?

This is the point where the investigation stops, because the police and the prosecutors, in order to propose the court a conviction of the guilty doctors, need to demonstrate that the girls were in fact, affected by the primitive procedures applied to them.

What is even more frustrating is that it seems that the international organizations are more interested in this case, than the Romanian ones. For instance, the doctors from the Disciplinary Commission of the Doctors

Association, which finally sanctioned Dr. Ioana Ghionescu, when they heard Alina, made all kind of rhetorical statements, such as: *"Why did you go there? Why did you agree to take money for what you donated? Do you think you are the only one that had problems after such a procedure?"* This had a bad effect on Alina's mental state.

### Conclusion

We are not trying to either justify or condemn the behaviour of the two girls or of many others like them. We are trying to understand how someone like Raluca, for example, can possibly survive living with little over 100 US dollars per month, with a growing child to support. The impossibility of getting a better-paid job, the time these girls have to spend away from their families, and many other social reasons, are some of the reasons why they have become the subjects of this dramatic story.

Our opinion is that, without proper support and especially without support from the competent European Union institutions, without putting pressure on the Romanian Authorities to quicken the process of establishing the legal limits of such medical procedures, there will be many other cases like these.

Assistance and support from the European Union may not be such a difficult problems. But what is difficult is how to fight against a very productive and tempting business initiative, as egg trading is becoming, with commercial interests that are sometimes beyond our imagination. We need to ensure that doctors are deviated from the desire to apply such procedures, no matter how enormous the possible earnings could be.

Can we accept in a just society that the lack of financial resources for organizing a wedding is a justifiable reason for Alina to donate eggs? Can we explain it all away on the basis of minimal education and the lack of information?

We think that with initiatives such as this Seminar, and with the help of organizations such as yours, and maybe by informing in all possible ways about the advantages and mostly, about the disadvantages of these procedures, we can consider we have extended a helping hand to those less prepared, less informed and less gifted.

Thank you deeply.

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