

## Cyprus clinic at centre of human egg trafficking probe

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They may never see the light of day but Maria is not abandoning her Cypriot "children", embryos that were seized after the fertility clinic where they were conceived in vitro was closed on suspicion of human egg trafficking.

Petra House, a large stone building near the fishing village of Zygi that housed the clinic in southern Cyprus, has been empty since mid-May when it was abandoned by its medical staff, mostly Russians.

"The staff have disappeared and the fate of our [embryos](#) is a mystery," said Maria, an Italian who came to Cyprus for treatment and would not give her real name because of the investigation into the allegations.

"We cannot entrust our own lives to people without scruples, who play around with embryos and gametes as if they were toys," she said.

Like other foreign patients, Maria and her husband were hoping the clinic's bank of gametes -- eggs and sperm -- could help them start a family.

But the facility, which works with the eggs of young women mostly from Russia and eastern Europe, was closed on suspicion of [illegal trade](#) in human eggs based on the testimony of three Ukrainian women in their thirties.

All of them were working in Cyprus legally, but according to police they

sold their eggs -- a violation of Cypriot law, which specifies that donors should only have their expenses covered.

Cypriot media have claimed the women were paid 1,500 euros per egg, although that has been denied by the police.

One woman is alleged to have visited Zygi seven times between November and May.

Legislation on egg donation varies across Europe, but many couples come to Cyprus to get round the laws on [fertility treatment](#) in their own countries -- especially Italy, where a restrictive law on assisted pregnancy was passed in 2004.

The inquiry also covers the suspected transfer of tissues and cells.

Officially, the clinic is under investigation for failing to provide full data for the tracing of embryos and gametes.

"Local and European practices require that the clinic provides the competent authorities with information about the traceability of the embryos and gametes," Filomena Gallo, a lawyer representing Maria and three other Italian patients, told AFP.

"The clinic in Zygi did not communicate this information. That is the official reason why it was closed."

Soon afterwards, the Italian and Israeli embassies -- whose nationals made up many of the clinic's patients -- were inundated with calls from couples worried about their embryos or questioning the parentage of children conceived at Zygi.

The clinic's biological material has been transferred to a state institution

in Cyprus, according to Gallo, with the authorities insisting they are doing all they can to guarantee its protection and traceability.

Contacted by AFP, the health ministry declined to comment, saying the inquiry was not yet complete.

"I promised to my eight Cypriot embryos that have been confiscated that I will fight to the end," said Maria.

She condemned the Cypriot authorities for what she said was their "lack of control" in the case.

Like her, many couples are working around restrictive laws on fertility treatment in their own countries by coming to Cyprus, a favoured destination for what has become known as fertility tourism.

The short time it takes to obtain the gametes, competitive costs and the anonymity of the donors all help to attract patients to the island, said a gynecologist speaking on condition of anonymity.

He said that egg trafficking goes on at other clinics in Cyprus, but did not give details. "Everyone knows that, but we don't do anything (about it)."

None of this comes as a surprise to Jacques Testart, research director at the INSERM medical institute in Paris, who helped pioneer France's first test-tube baby.

"There are rumours circulating about trafficking in Europe, although they are difficult to prove," he said.

"There will always be a need for the 'hens' and there will always be women who do that to earn a bit of money... especially in the current

economic crisis."

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