

### **Book Essay**

#### ***Embryo Culture: Making Babies in The Twenty-First Century, Beth Kohl, 2007***

This autobiographic book highlights the complex and difficult pathway that Elizabeth Kohl and her husband Gary Feinerman experienced with starting a family by opting for *In-Vitro* Fertilisation (IVF). Her reflexion is articulated in three major points: all the *care pathway she endured*, *ethical questions & values* and *post-IVF follow-up*.

***Care pathway*** - or how to choose the perfect doctor? how to trust a care administration? how to being considered at the center of the medical care delivery? In the United States, hundreds of different IVF centers exist, from big ones to smaller ones, from private centers to hospitals services. The narrator emphasizes the difficulty of making the choice of 'who is going to allow me having my own children'. Beth Kohl first encountered a recommended doctor who diagnosed her a tumor instead of polycystic ovarian syndrome only by asking questions about her menstrual cycle, without asking for medical exams such as an MRI. Deterred, she consulted other doctors, but she experienced misadministration of medication and received advices to change her diet that could be responsible of her infertility. Beth Kohl finally turned to one of the best IVF center: *Great Lake Fertility Center* basing herself on public statistics. There, at first sight, she felt that she was in good hands with professionals: psychologists, a dedicated nurse, doctors... However, through her IVF pathway, she felt abandoned, she was on her own to face and respect the complex protocol: considerable number of drugs and hormones that must be taken on precise moments of the day, no stressful situations or environment... Beth Kohl also focuses on the presence of a financial counsellor during the IVF process and the feeling of not being a patient, but a patient identification number, a number that must be presented for all procedures.

***Ethical value of patients*** - or how to obtain answers? how to manage stress and the fear of failure? are the patient's outcomes taking into consideration? Many ethical aspects are criticised in this book by the author. On one hand, the psychological accompaniment is very low, nearly inexistent whereas depression linked to IVF is considered by the fertility center as important as for cancers and AIDS for instance. Other ways to have children such as adoption are not evoked by the center but only by Gary Feinerman, her husband. They are both discovering the IVF pathway at the same time they are experiencing it. Both facing the question of 'what do you want to do with the supernumerary embryos' while they have to take the decision, without previous time of reflexion, concertation or information about it. On the other hand, Beth Kohl is criticising the batch procedure which discomfits her. Indeed, the fertility center synch its patient menstrual cycles so that doctors could easily follow the procreation time. Thanks to this procedure, the embryo implantation intervention can be quick, patient 2 after 1, patient 3 after 2 and so on.

***Post-IVF follow-up*** - is that all? what kind of care pathway for the children? Beth Kohl is questioning herself on 'is her IVF-children as normal as naturally-conceived-children. She also criticises the non-accompaniment after her childbirth by the IVF center. Indeed, doctors discharged themselves as soon as the child is born, they are no more responsible of his health.

Embryo culture: Making Babies in The Twenty-First Century gives an individual point of view of a couple and more particularly of a woman dealing with IVF in the United States. As a reader, we can easily feel the doubts that raised in her mind and the confidence she placed in doctors which sometimes, are not the right things to do when you consider the consequences. However, I wanted to focus on three particular points in the book that may have needed more explanations.

**The definition of ‘normal babies’** - In most of the chapters, Beth Kohl brings a lot of importance to her future new born babies. She questioned how different IVF babies could be compared to ‘normal babies’. However, she never defined what she was underlying with the term ‘normal’ and from my point of view, that’s not the ideal term to use. Indeed, each person has his own vision of ‘normality’. She should highlights her defiance with IVF-made babies more in a sense of assisted reproductive technology (ART) consequences of act.

**The choice of *Great Lake Fertility Center*** - From the beginning of the story, the author explains her choice of going at this particular fertility center because of the success rate. She supports this argument saying “specialists have had plenty of time and patients on which to practice their craft and refine and perfect its methods”. We can deduce that the success rate of this IVF center is calculated by the number of successful pregnancies out of the number of women who have undergone IVF, it could also be the number of embryo created from the number of follicles collected or linked to the date of the foundation of the clinic, even a recognition based on the money it generates or anything else. This (we don’t know how) calculated rate is compared with other centers that classes *Great Lake Fertility Center* among the best in the United States. But why did she not choose another one. What have convinced her to choose this center? Maybe because of the name that sounds idyllic. The success rate methodology should be defined and calculated on the patient outcomes, on what are patient’s expectations before, during and after the IVF process. I would have been happier reading “specialists have had plenty of time and patients on which to practice outcomes and refine and perfect their methods”. If the success rate was based on patient outcomes then Great Lake Fertility Center would probably not be among the best fertility centers of North America and Beth Kohl would probably not have chosen it.

**The decision of conceiving her second and third children at the same center** - On one side, another patient told Beth Kohl “they should have stacks of customer satisfaction surveys all around this place” and added that another fertility center had implemented it. This is totally in line with a value-based healthcare principle, a suggestion that the author transmitted to her dedicated nurse proof of flaws in the quality of care. However, on the other side, the author decided to entrust the same center to conceive, trough ART, her second and third children. It would have been great to understand this decision, was it by purpose or because her embryos were frozen at that place which given her no choices?

On an overall aspect, it would have been really interesting to understand the solutions and expectations the author had, and have now after having experiencing IVF in this center. Finally, the book changed my vision on IVF from a rather simple procedure to something that involved many other factors: relationship, reliance, accompaniment, weight of procedure, ...