

PRESS RELEASE

Ghana's first low-cost 'Walking Egg' IVF baby is born

GENK-ACCRA, August 10 - The low cost IVF project pioneered by the Belgian specialist prof. dr. Willem Ombelet (Ziekenhuis Oost-Limburg) reached a milestone yesterday. Three years after the launch of the cheap, revolutionary IVF method, the first African baby to be produced with the help the new technology has been born in Ghana. Prof. dr. Ombelet is delighted but there are still obstacles to surmount if the technology is to break through globally and offer hope to the millions of less affluent childless couples.

In 2014, prof. dr. Willem Ombelet made world headlines. Together with his team of fertility experts of The Walking Egg non-profit Organization of the Genk Institute for Fertility Technology, he developed and launched a technique that offers IVF treatment at a fraction of the usual cost. It is now possible to receive treatment for approximately 20 to 25 percent of the regular price in a specific country. Prof. dr. Ombelet was particularly interested in helping couples with fertility issues in resource-poor countries. 'For women in developing countries, infertility is even more of a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads,' he explains. 'They risk being abandoned by their husbands and rejected by their families. In addition, the quality of their lives in old age is often dependent on whether a couple has children.'

First African baby

Yesterday, over three years after the project began, the good news emerged from Ghana that the first non-European, low cost IVF baby had been delivered: a healthy boy weighing 3.3 kg. 'We have known for a long time that our technology functions perfectly', says prof. dr. Ombelet. 'Via the ZOL fertility centre, eighty-nine healthy babies have already been born using the new method in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. But we had to wait some time for the first success in Africa. Working conditions are often of a significantly lower quality and the distances involved mean that it isn't always easy to provide African doctors with proper training in using the technique. That's why we're so pleased that this pregnancy came to such a successful conclusion. There will be a second birth soon, as another Ghanaian woman is now 7 months pregnant.'

Obstacles

Nevertheless, prof. dr Ombelet has encountered setbacks in launching the technology in the developing world. 'The administrative nightmare that we especially have to deal with in African countries, cannot be overlooked. Each country imposes different requirements for accreditation and the regulations concerning import duties on our equipment also vary from country to country, which can mean import procedures taking months. Finally, we continue to face opposition from the powerful, traditional IVF lobby. They are against a new, cheap IVF method that threatens their lucrative, traditional technology.'

But prof. dr. Ombelet and his team are on course for success in other countries too. Their technology can count on interest from fertility clinics in places such as Portugal, the UK, Egypt, the United States, China and India. 'After all,' Ombelet points out, 'there are many infertile couples living in countries where IVF is not covered, who want children and who don't have the financial resources to dish out 4,000 euros or more for IVF treatment.'

Prof. dr. Ombelet is available for further information. Please contact Jurgen Ritzen, ZOL spokesperson, by telephone on 0032477616642.