

This Brazilian Doctor Brought Forth 5,000 Test Tube Babies

Contributed by Débora Rubin
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When he travelled to Lebanon for the first time, six years ago, doctor Roger Abdelmassih participated in a congress about human reproduction of which he was the chairman. Despite having travelled on business, he made a point of travelling to Anfe, North of Beirut, to visit the house where his father was born.

When he got there, he saw an ancient palm tree and asked to borrow a shovel. He started digging and collected a bag of earth. When he got to his office, in São Paulo, he put the earth in a Baccarat crystal and placed the memento in his office. There, says the doctor, is the origin of his DNA.

Roger Abdelmassih, 63 years of age, a son of Lebanese immigrants, is one of the best known names in Brazil - and worldwide - when the theme is human reproduction.

His clinic, which is also a research center, is always full of couples who dream of having a son. Most seek doctor Abdelmassih after various frustrated attempts. Many of his clients are famous, and this just adds to the doctor's fame.

His most famous patient, of course, was former football player Pelé, who visited his clinic in 1996. With the Pelé and Assiria couple, Abdelmassih used the ICSI technique (Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection).

The technique, associated with in vitro fertilization, makes it possible for just one sperm to be injected into each ovule with the support of a micropipette and a microscope. The technique was brought to Brazil by the doctor in 1994. The result of the treatment used with the greatest football player of all time was the birth of twins Celeste and Joshua, currently aged nine.

The couple's pregnancy travelled the world and what took place was what Abdelmassih calls the "Pelé effect". "After his treatment was made public, people became more conscious of questions related to fertility," explained the doctor.

Other personalities also visited his clinic on Brasil Avenue, in an upper class region of the city of São Paulo, among them famous television presenter Gugu Liberato, comedian Tom Cavalcanti and actress Luiza Thomé.

Everything in the life of the doctor is superlative. In March he celebrated baby number 5,000, born thanks to his most advanced assisted reproduction techniques. The first was born in 1989. Or better, the first babies, as they are twins - currently aged 17.

Every month, 140 fertilization attempts take place. An average of 55 babies are born a month. And each attempt costs between US\$ 7,000 (15,000 reais) and US\$ 8,500 (18,000 reais). A total of 50 people work at the clinic.

And investment in research is also not shy. Since 2005, the center has been dedicated to the creation of ovules and sperm from stem cells - if this works out, couples that are infertile may stop having to use the gametes of other donors. The center is investing no less than US\$ 1 million in research.

Pioneer

Abdelmassih was the first to execute in vitro fertilization within a clinic - before that, only hospitals did it. His clinic is currently among the 15 most important human reproduction clinics in the world.

His clients come from all parts of the world, mainly from the United States and Europe. Doctor Roger makes a point of meeting all his clients. He greets all the couples in the entrance lobby and when they enter his office, sometimes desperate and anxious, he soothes them: don't worry, we'll solve it.

In fact, the chances of women up to the age of 35 reach 55% at Abdelmassih's clinic. "To give an idea, a young and healthy couple has between 18% and 20% chance of getting pregnant. Here, the possibility is much greater," he explained.

After so many years helping infertile couples, he knows how to deal with anxiety. "The pain of the lack, of the absence of a child, is one of the worst things there are," stated the doctor, who sees this pain closely every day. He himself has never suffered the ailment of his patients. A father of five children, Abdelmassih is now awaiting the birth of his 12th grandson.

The doctor of 5,000 children entered college in 1963, in the first class of the University of Campinas (Unicamp), in the

interior of the state of São Paulo. In 1968, he decided to specialize himself in urology. In the beginning, he only treated men with fertility problems. Little by little, he also started treating women.

The taste for medicine comes from his childhood. "I always wanted to be a doctor, and always had the desire to win, to be the best," he confesses.

Abdelmassih comes from a family of tradesmen. His father left the city of Anfe at the age of 14, in 1925, and came to Brazil to be a travelling salesman. From travelling salesman to shop owner in the interior of São Paulo, and in a short time he was already buying farms.

The youngest of three children, Abdelmassih realized that which was the dream of all Lebanese families that arrived in Brazil at that time: having a son who was a doctor.

Born in Brazil, Abdelmassih says that he feels Lebanese. He keeps the traditions of his family, is a fan of Arab food even for breakfast and has a map of Lebanon in his office. He only doesn't speak Arabic. "This is one of my largest pains," he laments. "My parents spoke Arabic when they didn't want us to understand."

When he was in Beirut, at the time in which he got a little of the earth from the house his father used to live in, in Anfe, the doctor received from the Lebanese government a decoration for being a successful son of Lebanese parents. And, of course, he hung the decoration up on the wall of his office, in front of the map of Lebanon.

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