

## [José Pedro Balmaceda \(1948- \)](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

By: Gilson, Hilary Keywords: [Biography](#) <sup>[2]</sup> [Fertility](#) <sup>[3]</sup> [Reproductive assistance](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

José Pedro [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> was born 22 August 1948 in Santiago, Chile. His mother Juanita owned a women's boutique in the city and his father José was a successful owner of several timber mills. He grew up with five sisters who remained in Santiago all their lives. [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> attended the college preparatory school San Ignatius where he met [Sergio Stone](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, his future partner at the Center for Reproductive Health fertility clinic in the University of California Irvine Medical Center. In 1974 [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> graduated from [Catholic University Medical School](#) <sup>[7]</sup> and became a resident at the [University of Chile](#) <sup>[8]</sup> Hospital where he worked in obstetrics and gynecology.

In 1975 [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> and his wife Veronica Pascal were accused of hiding political dissidents in their home and were forced with their two children to flee into political exile from the totalitarian rule of General Augusto Pinochet. They escaped to Denmark, and one year later the University of Texas recruited [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> to its medical facility in San Antonio where he completed his obstetrics and gynecology residency in 1980. The following year the [Rockefeller Foundation](#) <sup>[9]</sup> awarded him a fellowship in reproductive [endocrinology](#) <sup>[10]</sup> and he began a close working relationship with fellow doctor [Ricardo Asch](#) <sup>[11]</sup>, who in 1984 pioneered a new assisted reproduction technique called gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT).

In 1986 [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> moved to California to work at the University of California Irvine Medical Center (UCIMC). He and Asch formed a private partnership the same year, the Center for Reproductive Health, where [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> and his associates would later be accused of conducting highly unethical practices. [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> worked with Asch in the Garden Grove clinic until he took over the Saddleback clinic in 1989, just before the Garden Grove clinic moved to the University of California Medical Center. Balmaceda's reputation soared and he was invited to present his fertility research in places as diverse as Kenya, Switzerland, Israel, France, Italy, Indonesia, Korea, and Venezuela.

In February 1995 all research at the clinics halted when serious malpractice allegations unfolded: the doctors had allegedly performed [egg](#) <sup>[12]</sup> and embryo transfers without consent. By June the clinic's doors officially closed and investigations of Asch, [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, and Stone were underway. When news of the fertility clinic's scandals hit the headlines, [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> distributed a letter to the UCI College of Medicine condemning the administration for accusing all three doctors of having equal responsibility in the wrongdoing. [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> contended that the misappropriation of eggs was largely Asch's doing, facilitated by laissez-faire management by the university. In September of 1995 [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> visited his mother in Santiago, Chile, and never returned to the United States to receive his indictments. The following year [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> was labeled a fugitive, indicted in absentia on twenty counts of mail fraud for insurance billing, and his faculty salary at the University of California Irvine was terminated.

In Chile, [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> began work at one of the country's most prestigious private practices, the [Clinica Las Condes](#) <sup>[13]</sup> in Santiago. Most of his colleagues celebrated his return to Chile and dismissed the clinic scandal as gossip. However, his new life in Chile was disrupted by personal tragedy when his wife committed suicide in 1999, leaving [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> with four children. On 17 January 2001 he was arrested at the Ezeiza Airport in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and held for extradition to the United States on charges of mail fraud and tax evasion. He was released on bail with orders not to leave Argentina but failed to attend his court hearing that February. [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> returned to Chile, maintaining it would be impossible to find justice under Argentinean law.

Since 2003 [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> has served as the director of the [Latin American Assisted Reproduction Network](#) <sup>[14]</sup>. The group reports success rates for fertility clinics in Chile, Peru, and Bolivia, and ironically, standardizes patient consent forms. [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> continues to place blame for the California scandal on the university administrators for not taking action sooner and claims to be innocent of any illegal [egg](#) <sup>[12]</sup> transfers. He also laments the prosecution of his ex-associate [Sergio Stone](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, whom [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> claims never participated in any assisted reproduction procedures. [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[5]</sup> has given many interviews and made appearances on television programs professing his innocence, but the fertility clinic scandal remains a mark on his reputation and that of others.

## Sources

1. Dodge, Mary, and Gilbert Geis. *Stealing Dreams: A Fertility Clinic Scandal* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003.

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