

## [Ricardo Hector Asch \(1947- \)](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

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

Ricardo Hector Asch was born 26 October 1947 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to a lawyer and French professor, Bertha, and a doctor and professor of surgery, Miguel. Asch's family middle-class family lived among the largest Jewish community in Latin America, where a majority of males were professionals. After his graduation from National College No. 3 Mariano Moreno in Buenos Aires, Asch worked as a teaching assistant in human reproduction and [embryology](#) <sup>[5]</sup> at the [University of Buenos Aires](#) <sup>[6]</sup> School of Medicine where he received his medical degree in 1971.

In 1975 Asch moved to the United States to do postdoctoral work in [endocrinology](#) <sup>[7]</sup> at the [Medical College of Georgia](#) <sup>[8]</sup> in Augusta. There he worked for Robert Benjamin Greenblatt, a pioneer in [birth control](#) <sup>[9]</sup> pills, fertility treatments, and [estrogen](#) <sup>[10]</sup> therapy for menopausal women. Four years later Asch received a reproduction biology fellowship in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the [University of Texas Health Sciences Center](#) <sup>[11]</sup> in San Antonio, where he would later be named director. There he met José [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[12]</sup>, who would remain closely involved in the fame and misfortune of his medical career. In 1984 Asch is credited with perfecting gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT), an innovative technique in assisted reproduction. Other researchers experimented with the procedure prior to Asch, but he and [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[12]</sup> were the first to achieve a human [pregnancy](#) <sup>[13]</sup>. Asch's published research on [oocyte](#) <sup>[14]</sup> donation and GIFT was later named the prize paper at the forty-third annual meeting of the [American Fertility Society](#) <sup>[15]</sup>.

Licensed to practice medicine in Argentina and Texas, Asch joined the faculty at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) in March 1986 prior to taking the California Federation Licensing Examination. Though they later denied signing it, a waiver with the signatures of [Sergio Stone](#) <sup>[16]</sup> and medical chief of staff Phillip DiSaia requesting the state board waive the test requirement was approved in 1989 and Asch received his California medical license. The same year marked another of Asch's inventions: he and [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[12]</sup> employed a newly developed catheter in their GIFT procedure eliminating the need for general anesthesia.

Asch had a luxurious lifestyle, complete with a beach house outside San Diego and five thoroughbred horses that he raced for a handsome profit. He founded the company Asch Entertainment to manufacture and market sporting goods and media. Asch also worked hard to give opportunities to minorities at the University, and within three years of starting a campaign had recruited twenty-eight Latino students to join the existing two.

Asch lectured in France, Panama, Spain, Japan, Italy, and Argentina during 1990 and 1991, averaging over eight weeks abroad each year, accruing two honorary professorships in the latter two countries. In 1994 the Irvine Alumni Association granted Asch the Lauds and Laurels Professional Achievement Award. In 1995, however, evidence of misconduct arose surrounding Asch's work at the Center for Reproductive Health at UCI Medical Center. Asch, along with [Balmaceda](#) <sup>[12]</sup> and [Sergio Stone](#) <sup>[16]</sup>, was accused of stealing eggs and embryos from some patients at the fertility clinic and transplanting them into others without either party's consent. Just before his indictments, Asch liquidated his assets and fled the United States for Mexico. The Orange County Superior Court issued an order for him to return in November of 1995 that he ignored. Asch remained in Mexico, and in 1997 he was indicted in absentia by a federal grand jury for mail fraud for insurance billing, using fertility drugs not approved by the FDA at the time, and intentionally stealing eggs from at least five patients without their consent.

After leaving the United States, Asch continued his reproductive research and fertility work in Mexico at the Grupo de Reproducción y Genética AGN y Asociados clinic at the Hospital Angeles in the neighborhood of San Angel. Later he switched to private practice and was employed as the director at the Reproducción Asistida de México. As of 2003 Asch had opened multiple fertility clinics throughout Mexico including the cities of Cancún, Acapulco, and Puebla. He is currently collaborating with specialists in Barcelona trying to perfect [preimplantation genetic diagnosis](#) <sup>[17]</sup>, testing that could theoretically screen embryos for over ten chromosomal abnormalities. His wife Silvia, four daughters, and adopted son all reside in the US and frequently visit him in Mexico.

Whether the drive to use eggs and embryos without the consent of patients was to bolster success rates within the clinic or for other reasons, Asch's ethical misconduct mars his record of achievement and he remains an infamous figure. Despite multiple awards and recognition for his medical success, Asch's tarnished reputation stemming from his actions at the Center for Reproductive Health stands out against an otherwise impressive career and his legacy is important debate over the ethical and legal consequences of fertility treatments worldwide.

## Sources

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

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## Subject

[Asch, Ricardo H.](#) <sup>[18]</sup> [Fertility](#) <sup>[19]</sup>

## Topic

[Ethics](#) <sup>[20]</sup> [People](#) <sup>[21]</sup>

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[Articles](#) <sup>[22]</sup>

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## Links

- [1] <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/ricardo-hector-asch-1947>
- [2] <https://embryo.asu.edu/keywords/biography>
- [3] <https://embryo.asu.edu/keywords/fertility>
- [4] <https://embryo.asu.edu/keywords/reproductive-assistance>
- [5] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=embryology>
- [6] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=University%20of%20Buenos%20Aires>
- [7] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=endocrinology>
- [8] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=Medical%20College%20of%20Georgia>
- [9] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=birth%20control>
- [10] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=estrogen>
- [11] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=University%20of%20Texas%20Health%20Sciences%20Center>
- [12] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=Balmaceda>
- [13] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=pregnancy>
- [14] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=oocyte>

- [15] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=American%20Fertility%20Society>
- [16] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=Sergio%20Stone>
- [17] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=preimplantation%20genetic%20diagnosis>
- [18] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/asch-ricardo-h>
- [19] <https://embryo.asu.edu/medical-subject-headings/fertility>
- [20] <https://embryo.asu.edu/topics/ethics>
- [21] <https://embryo.asu.edu/topics/people>
- [22] <https://embryo.asu.edu/formats/articles>