Vegas Baby (2016) [1]

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In 2016, Runaway Films released the documentary Vegas Baby. The film, directed by Amanda Micheli, follows three women who struggle with infertility [4] as they undergo in vitro fertilization [5], or IVF treatment, to become pregnant. In IVF treatment, a woman’s egg [6] is fertilized by a sperm [7] outside of the woman’s body. Once the sperm [7] fertilizes the egg [6], a fertility doctor places the fertilized egg [8] back into the woman’s uterus [9]. The three women in the film enter the I Believe contest hosted by the Sher Institute of Reproductive Medicine in Las Vegas, Nevada. A panel of judges chooses the winner, who is awarded a free single cycle of IVF treatment. Although only one of the women presented in the documentary wins the contest, the other two women still undergo IVF treatment. Vegas Baby brought awareness to both the infertility [4] problems experienced by couples and IVF treatment as an alternative method for causing pregnancy [10].

In the 1970s, gynecologist Patrick Steptoe [11] and developmental biologist Robert Edwards [12] introduced IVF to treat female infertility [4]. Since the 1970s, IVF has become a popular treatment for couples who struggle to become pregnant. As of 2018, a single cycle of IVF treatment consists of four parts. First, a woman injects herself with medication for a certain amount of time. The medication stimulates multiple follicles, or fluid-filled sacs, to develop in the woman’s ovaries, the organ where female eggs develop. Each follicle contains one female reproductive cell, the egg [6]. As the woman continues injections, the follicles and eggs begin to develop for eight to ten days. While injecting herself with medication, the woman undergoes blood and ultrasound [13] testing every one to three days to monitor the follicles. An ultrasound [13] is an imaging technique that uses sound to produce images of inside the body.

Once the woman’s follicles are mature, a medical professional puts the woman under anesthesia. Next, the fertility doctor passes a needle through the top of the woman’s vagina [14], while an ultrasound [13] assists in guiding the needle to the ovary [15] and follicles. Once the doctor locates the follicles, the doctor uses the needle to detach the egg [6] from the follicle wall and remove the egg [6] from the ovary [15]. Next, medical professionals place the eggs in an IVF lab for fertilization [16]. Four hours after the egg [6] retrieval process, lab technicians place the sperm [7] of a partner or donor with the egg [6]. An embryologist injects sperm [7] individually into each egg [6], a process called intracytoplasmic sperm injection [17]. Once a sperm [7] fertilizes an egg [6], an embryo forms. The lab cultures the embryos for two to five days.

Lastly, the patient undergoes an embryo transfer [18] procedure. Assisted by ultrasound [13] imaging, a doctor places one or more embryos in the woman’s uterus [9]. After the procedure, the woman is sent home. Fourteen days later, she returns to the clinic to take a pregnancy [10] test that determines if she is pregnant and if the IVF treatment was successful. IVF works for 30 percent of women and a single four-part cycle may cost between $12,000 and $15,000.

Vegas Baby follows three women as they enter the I Believe contest hosted by the Sher Institute. Each contestant posts a video on YouTube explaining why they should win the contest. A panel of judges chooses the winner of the contest, who receives a free single cycle of IVF treatment. Although only one of the three women in the documentary wins, the other two women still pursue a single cycle of IVF treatment that they receive at a discounted rate from the Sher Institute.

The opening of Vegas Baby shows a woman as she prepares to undergo transvaginal ultrasound [19]-guided egg [6] retrieval for IVF. While the woman is preparing for the procedure, she explains that she has spent greater than $200,000 on IVF treatments to become pregnant and start a family. As the woman explains her desire for a child, Geoffrey Sher, physician and co-founder of the Sher Institute of Reproductive Medicine, enters the operating room and explains that he would like to obtain five to six mature eggs from the woman. After the procedure, an embryologist confirms that six mature eggs were collected.

As the documentary continues discussing IVF, Linda Vignapiano, a clinical director at the Sher Institute, discusses the average cost for a single cycle of IVF. According to Vignapiano, a single cycle of IVF costs $12,000 plus an additional $5,000 for medication. Vignapiano also notes that travel expenses are not included and an average total cost for one cycle of IVF is around $20,000.

Following the discussion of the cost of IVF, the film shows a compilation of television news stories that discuss infertility [4] in the United States. According to Carolyn Johnson, a news anchor for ABC7 News, more than seven million men and women suffer from infertility [4] in the United States. As the compilation continues, several anchors discuss the I Believe contest hosted by the Sher Institute. In the documentary, several members of the Sher Institute gather to discuss the contest. Lisa Stark, the medical
director of the Sher Institute, begins by explaining that contestants post their videos to YouTube where the public will vote to decide the top ten finalists. After the public selects the top ten finalists, the Sher Institute assigns judges to decide the final winner of the contest. As the meeting about the contest continues, Vignapiano states that the true mission of the contest is to raise awareness of infertility.  

As the employees of the Sher Institute continue to discuss the I Believe contest, filmmakers interview the judges of the contest. Jennifer Jay Palumbo, a contest judge, discusses how the couples entering the contest feel that the contest may be their last hope and last chance for having a child. Following the interview with Palumbo, Carolyn Savage, another contest judge, explains the courage it takes for the individuals to submit their videos for the public to view. After the interviews end, a slide indicates that two weeks of open voting are to take place on the internet. Close to one hundred people entered the contest.

The film continues as three of the contestants are introduced: Rosalinda, Athena Reich, and Ann. The contestants explain their reasoning for entering the contest. The first contestant the documentary introduces is Rosalinda and her husband, Dago, an employee of a Catholic television station in San Antonio, Texas. According to the film, Rosalinda and Dago have been trying to become pregnant for five years. The film then moves to New York City, New York, and introduces Reich, an actress and singer-songwriter and the second contestant. Reich explains that she has been trying to become pregnant for two years. Furthermore, Reich states that she is trying to find the right partner, but that her mother supports her decision to be a single mother.

Following the introduction of Reich, the documentary introduces the last contestant and her husband. The third contestant, Ann and her husband Brian, live in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and have been trying to get pregnant for seven years. During the interview, Ann acknowledges her infertility problems. Her husband Brian notes that they had to take out a loan to pay for IVF treatments. As the interview continues, Ann and Brian discuss past procedures that Ann underwent. During one procedure, a medical professional placed two eggs in Ann’s uterus and Ann became pregnant with twins. At week twenty of pregnancy, Ann’s water broke and one fetus, which she had named Noah, died. She underwent surgery to prevent losing both fetuses. Ann’s water broke again at week twenty-three of pregnancy and she gave birth to her daughter, Katalynn, who died a few hours after birth.

After Ann and Brian explain the death of their twins, the interview continues and the couple discusses other methods they have tried to have children. One method the couple tried was fostering children in hopes of adopting them. According to Ann and Brain, they fostered two girls for one year before the biological parents returned to take back their children. As the interview with Ann and Brian ends, Rosalinda and Dago discuss the treatments they have gone through. During the interview, Rosalinda notes that she has gone through four cycles of IVF and has had two frozen embryo transfers. In a frozen embryo transfer, doctors thaw a frozen embryo from a woman’s prior IVF cycle and place that embryo back into the woman’s uterus.

Following the interview with Rosalinda and Dago, the filmmakers interview Keiko Doll, an infertility advocate. Doll explains that she declined an offer to be a judge for the I Believe contest. According to Doll, IVF is a medical procedure that is a necessity for people to treat their disease and she disagrees with the idea of IVF being part of a contest. In response to Doll, Sher acknowledges how difficult it is for the average American to afford IVF and adds that many individuals cannot afford the treatment. At the end of Sher’s interview, he agrees with those who say that there should not be a contest for IVF though his Institute offers the contest.

As the film continues, Sher notifies the contestants who won the I Believe contest and discusses how IVF worked when he first began offering it to patients. Sher notifies Ann and Brian that they are the winners of the I Believe contest via video conference. After he ends the video conference with Ann and Brian, Sher explains that he started performing IVF in 1983 and 1984. According to Sher, when he began performing IVF, his first ten patients did not get pregnant and he had to learn how to improve his success rate. Sher explains that in the IVF treatments he performed on the next four women, three women in a row got pregnant. After Sher’s interview ends, Doll explains that the success rate of a single round of IVF is 30 percent.

After the discussion of the low success rate of IVF, Ann and Brian have a video conference with Sher and Vignapiano. Vignapiano explains the basics of IVF to Ann and Brian. According to Vignapiano, Ann will take fertility injections for an unspecified amount of time to prepare for egg retrieval, which will lead to an embryo transfer. As Vignapiano notes, Sher has all his patients cycle at the same time. There are forty-five people in the cycle presented in the documentary. Vignapiano states that an average woman who is not undergoing IVF treatment will grow one follicle per cycle, and from that one follicle the woman will ovulate one egg. When preparing for IVF, women take multiple injections of leuprolide acetate which stimulates a woman’s ovaries to produce multiple eggs.

After Vignapiano finishes explaining the preparation of a single cycle of IVF, Sher performs the egg retrieval procedure on Ann and Rosalinda. Though Athena is not shown undergoing IVF, she undergoes the same procedure performed by Sher. During Ann’s procedure, Sher collects twenty-seven eggs, twenty-two of which are mature. Sher expresses to Ann that he is pleased with the results of the procedure. During Rosalinda’s procedure, Sher collects fourteen eggs. After the eggs from Rosalinda are
collected, the film shows the fourteen mature eggs on day one transform into nine embryos on day two, then to two embryos on day five. Following her procedure, Ann experiences high blood pressure and Sher states that he does not feel comfortable implanting two embryos into her uterus. Sher decides to only implant one embryo into Ann’s uterus. After Ann’s procedure, Sher implants two embryos into Rosalinda’s uterus. Two weeks after Ann, Rosalinda, and Athena underwent IVF, they are notified whether they are pregnant. The film continues to follow Ann, Rosalinda, and Athena’s IVF cycles. Vignapiano notifies Ann that she is pregnant, while Rosalinda is notified by Vignapiano that she is not pregnant. Athena decides to check a pregnancy test and explains that she is pregnant. However, Athena visits a physician shortly after learning about her pregnancy and the physician tells her that her fetus has died. After Athena learns about the death of her embryo, Sher and Vignapiano have a meeting to discuss Ann’s pregnancy results. Next, Vignapiano informs Sher about Ann’s ultrasound results. Though Ann’s fetus has been gestating for six weeks and two days, Vignapiano notifies Sher that Ann’s fetus appears to have a gestational age of five weeks and two days. In addition, Vignapiano notes that there is no fetal pole, one of the earliest ways to visually identify a developing fetus. As the meeting concludes, Sher states he thinks the fetus will die due to lagging growth.

Following the meeting between Sher and Vignapiano to discuss Ann’s ultrasound results, Ann visits Allahyar Jazayeri, a gynecologist, for another ultrasound. From the results of the ultrasound, Jazayeri informs Ann and Brian that the fetus is unchanged and no fetal heartbeat can be detected. After Ann and Brian learn about the death of their fetus, the documentary follows up with Ann and Brian, Rosalinda, and Dago, and Athena.

As Vegas Baby concludes with a six-month follow-up, the three contestants explain what has happened since the last cycle of IVF they received from Sher. Rosalinda says that she is trying another cycle of IVF with Sher. Sher also offered Ann another cycle of IVF for free and Ann accepted. The film shows Ann receiving an ultrasound, which depicts a gestational sac with a heartbeat. Ann announces that she is having a girl. Then, Athena explains she is looking into egg donation. Athena says that becoming an egg donor was the most fitting option since she wants to be pregnant with a fetus and her own eggs are not suitable for reproducing. According to the documentary, Athena chose a program with a money-back guarantee if she does not get pregnant. However, Athena gets pregnant on her first attempt by using an egg donor and a sperm donor. After Athena discusses her pregnancy, Ann delivers her infant prematurely via caesarean section. Following Ann’s delivery, Athena gives birth to a male infant. Rosalinda’s additional cycle of IVF did not lead to pregnancy. The documentary concludes with a slide that states the I Believe contest is no longer held.

Vegas Baby brought awareness to infertility through the introduction of three women struggling with infertility who utilized IVF treatment as a method to become pregnant. The film debuted at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival. The film was also presented at Official Selection San Francisco International Film Festival and the 2016 AFI DOCS Official Selection. In 2016, the documentary won the Audience Award Winner Documentary Feature at the Independent Film Festival Boston.

Sources


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