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Stem cells unfortunately are part of a lucrative international trade

13 April 2012

The plastic bag looks as if it contains meat. But then a right leg is taken from it and placed surgically on the morgue table, followed by the left one. Then the torso. The head follows, a gaping cavity where the brain used to be.

But it is only when the gloved hand of the pathologist examines the tiny fingers of a baby aged about 30 weeks that the full horror of what I am witnessing sinks in.

This shocking scene was captured on video at post-mortem examinations carried out on behalf of Ukrainian mothers who claim their babies were stolen from them at birth.

The film was shown to me by an incredibly brave charity worker called Tatyana Zhakarova, who represents up to 300 families who believe their healthy babies were deliberately targeted at a maternity hospital in the Ukraine's most easterly city of Kharkiv.

The babies, believes Tatyana, were taken at birth to have their organs and stem cells harvested as part of a sickening but highly lucrative international trade.

Certainly, the Ukraine has become the main supplier of the global stem cell trade.

Officially, the cells are taken from aborted fetuses with the mothers' consent, but according to Tatyana, there could

Can she be right? Alarmed by her claims, I decided to launch my own investigations for a special BBC report, to be broadcast tomorrow.

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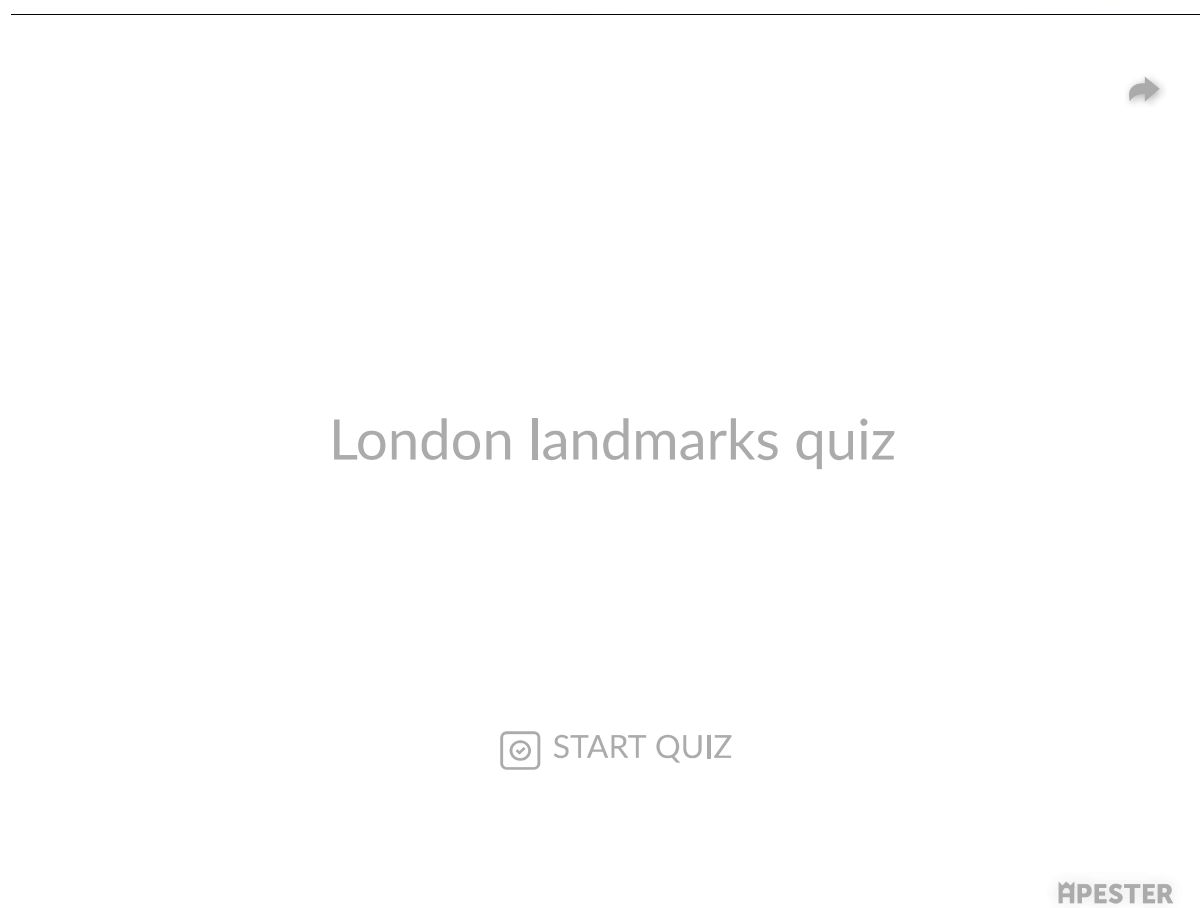
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My inquiries took me around the world, from a private clinic in the Caribbean to the desolate back streets of the Ukraine. What I uncovered is a disturbing tale involving claims of murder, conspiracy . . . and a sickening new beauty treatment.

The first hint I had of these allegations arose months ago during a conversation with one of the UK's foremost experts on stem cell research.



Dr Stephen Minger, from Kings College, London, is a distinguished medical researcher who believes stem cells hold the key to finding a cure for some of our major diseases.

These tiny cells, which first divide within an embryo, have the ability to transform themselves into any type of tissue. But it's their potential as a future treatment for conditions such as muscular dystrophy and Parkinson's disease that r excites Dr Minger.

He is one of many reputable experts who fear their research into this field is being given a bad name by companies making a fast buck out of untested stem cell therapies.

Dr Minger told me he found out about the trade in stem cells from aborted Ukrainian foetuses two years ago, when he was invited to meet doctors from a controversial clinic in Barbados. called the Institute For Regenerative Medicine (IRM), the firm wanted Dr Minger to lend his endorsement to its therapies.

The firm's website boasts IRM is "dedicated to excellence in stem cell therapy for the remediation of diseases resulting from tissue damage and/or the effects of aging". But its claims are treated with scepticism by experts.

The clinic's method of treatment involves injecting patients with stem cells taken from babies aborted between seven and ten weeks old.

It is a technique, says Dr Minger, that has no credible research to back it up, and that raises disturbing questions about how the cells have been 'harvested'.

"The problem is, I am not sure how the cells are prepared," he says. "A six-week-old embryo can be just 1cm from head to foot, so it's difficult to dissect tissue from it. They may just homogenise the whole embryo." That's a polite way of saying that the aborted babies could have been liquidised.

Dr Minger was especially troubled that as well as offering unproven therapy to patients with degenerative diseases - at up to £10,000 a time - the clinic was running a lucrative sideline in offering stem cell treatments to reverse the effects of ageing.

The firm boasts that such treatment can lead to everything from improved fitness and a better sex life to greater mental capacity and enhanced sleep patterns.

"I find it very distasteful that they are used for beauty treatments," says Dr Minger. "As far as I can tell from what's been published, a lot of people go to this clinic in Barbados feeling a bit run down, or that their skin has just lost some elasticity, and they are getting 'smoothies' or perk-me-ups."

The stem cells used in these techniques are bought by IRM from the Ukraine. They are said to be taken from aborted foetuses, with the mothers' consent. But could there be a link with the Ukrainian mothers who believe their babies were deliberately taken from them?

I travelled to Barbados to speak to one of IRM's senior doctors, Shami Ramesh.

Initially, I feared my journey was in vain. As I approached the 170-year-old colonial building where the clinic is based, I found the gates were padlocked - I was told by Dr Ramesh that I would have to come back in January.

But eventually I managed to persuade him to come to my hotel, where he said he could show me evidence of two studies that proved the treatments work.

This "proof" turned out to be one study of a single patient with motor neurone disease and another of eight cardiac patients. The numbers were too small for proper analysis and the data had not been published in any reputable peer-reviewed journal.

But Dr Ramesh's faith in the treatment was striking. "Foetal stem cells work," he said. "If patients were not getting better for money they would not be coming back to us for second and third infusions."

Then our conversation turned to the main part of my inquiry: how could he be certain the stem cells the clinic was using had indeed come only from aborted fetuses in the Ukraine - a country where there's very little regulation over issues like consent from donors.

Was it possible that the cells had, in fact, been harvested from fullterm babies without any consent from the parents?

Dr Ramesh denied any knowledge of babies being sacrificed for stem cells. He said he had faith in the Institute of Cryobiology in Kharkiv, the source of the stem cells used by the Barbados clinic, but added that "maybe in the future we will go and check it out".

I decided to travel to the Ukraine myself to see what sort of guarantee the Institute could offer about the source of its stem cells.

Once there, I made several attempts to interview the head of the Institute, Dr Valentin Greshenko, to put my concerns to him, but he refused. So my inquiries took me instead to Maternity Hospital Number Six, which stands in what my translator told me nervously was the "criminal area" of Kharkiv.

It was at this hospital, in 2002, that a young woman called Svetlana Plusikova gave birth to a baby girl. The 26-year-old agreed to meet me in a derelict fairground nearby, set in a leafless forest. She was too scared for me to come to her workplace.

Svetlana told me that after a relatively straightforward pregnancy, she gave birth without any complication. "It happened very, very quickly - the doctors didn't say anything."

It was only much later that she was informed the child had been stillborn. "They told me my child had already been dead inside me for five months."

Svetlana was unconvinced. Surely if her baby had been dead for so long, she would have suffered a miscarriage. And why was the dead infant not shown to her? It had been whisked away so quickly she didn't even have a chance to hear if it cried.

She has her own theories as to what happened. "I think she was stolen. If she was dead I should have been allowed to see her. I think a lot of young mothers like me lost their children, but right now nobody turns to the police."

Certainly, Svetlana is not alone in her suspicions. I met Dimitry and Olena Stulnev in their two-room flat nearby. I arrived during a power cut and started to interview them by candlelight. There, with tears running down her face, Olena told me about her own experience in Maternity Hospital Number Six.

"I gave birth to a healthy girl," Olena told me. "She was crying and moving her hands and legs. I was shown the baby. After that the girl was taken away. They told me everything was OK and I could see her the next day."

But that never happened. Olena was told the following day that her baby had died. But when she asked what had caused the death, the answers were inconsistent. "They told me three stories. One, she didn't have enough air to breathe; two, the lungs didn't open; and three, that her heart failed."

The couple tried in vain to find out what really happened, but the more they investigated, the firmer the doors were shut in their faces.

So she contacted a charity campaigner named Tatyana Zhakarova, from the Federation Of Families With Many Children, who took up the case on her behalf.

Tatyana discovered many more infants had died at the hospital in similarly odd circumstances. And after intensive lobbying, the authorities eventually agreed to have the tiny bodies of around 30 babies exhumed and examined.

Tatyana showed me the video she had been allowed to record of the post-mortem examinations that followed. The gruesome film shows the carcasses of babies, some of whom were full-term, with their organs and brains missing. Neurones in infants' brain are a rich source of stem cells.

Another body shown in the video is so badly dismembered it has to be put together piece by piece, like a jigsaw. Dismemberment is not standard autopsy practice and could, according to experts, indicate stem cells were harvested.

The post-mortem examination conclusions were profoundly disturbing. But Tatyana is now living in fear that the authorities are trying to silence her.

Her 20-year-old son went missing in October in mysterious circumstances, and she fears he may have been killed in revenge for her campaign to uncover the truth.

The Ukrainian authorities deny any conspiracy and refute claims that there is a trade in stem cells taken from stolen babies.

However, alarmed by the whole stem cell issue, the Council Of Europe is now carrying out its own investigation into the Ukrainian mothers' claims.

The Council's interim report talks of a "culture of trafficking of children snatched at birth and a wall of silence from hospital staff upwards over their fate".

As part of the second stage of the inquiry, the council will no doubt want to talk in detail to staff at Maternity Hospital Number Six. But whether they will get any answers is another matter - as I discovered when I tried to speak to the hospital authorities myself.

It was a grim scene. As I waited for hours at Maternity Hospital Number Six, heavily pregnant women in maternity smocks wandered past me in its dark corridors, along with the occasional elderly midwife.

Paint was peeling off the walls and there was a strong smell of antiseptic. Eventually, I was granted five minutes with the chief doctor, Larysa Nazarenko.

She was visibly uncomfortable as I set up my camera - her eyelids blinking rapidly as she stood behind her desk. "The children are not lost," she told me. "They are not stolen - that's just somebody else's illusion."

Who, she asked, had put these ideas in this young mother's head?

"It's about money," I said, "about stem cells. About Westerners paying a lot of money for stem cells from babies. And claims that cells from their brains are taken for treatment by various organisations."

"There is no such therapy," she said. "No work in this hospital is connected with the use of cells. This is the wrong address. I deny everything." Then I was ordered to leave.

Dr Nazarenko may have to spare more time to speak to Council Of Europe officials in February, when they will return to Kharkiv to continue their investigation.

The wall of silence is crumbling. And it may yet reveal a very ugly side to the global beauty business.

Matthew Hill's full report, The Stem Cell Swindle, can be heard on Radio 4 tomorrow at 5pm.

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