

## Feature

# 'I've seen strong, successful people torn to shreds by wanting a baby'

Mohamed Taranissi's London IVF clinic already has Britain's highest success rate. His next step, he tells **Alison Roberts**, is to roll out a nationwide fertility franchise



**L**AST month it was reported that Mohamed Taranissi, Britain's most controversial – and successful – IVF doctor, paid himself a dividend of £25 million in a single year from the profits of his clinic off Harley Street. Eyebrows were raised in the IVF sector: Taranissi is phenomenally rich and his business highly lucrative, yet it's well known that he lives a relatively modest life and has little time to spend his millions. He works at his Assisted Reproduction and Gynaecology Centre (ARGC) seven days a week, often for 13 or 14 hours a day; he does not own a car, hasn't taken a holiday in 10 years and lives with his family in an enviable but not extravagant flat in Marylebone.

Now the reason behind Taranissi's extraction of such a large sum in 2010 can be revealed. At 57, he is thinking of his legacy. The man who claims his clinic has outperformed all others for more than 15 years is planning a significant expansion of his business. He has in mind nothing less than the UK-wide franchising of the Taranissi method.

"I would like to leave behind a way of doing things that lasts beyond the individuals involved here. The big thing is to be, as it were, almost everywhere," he tells me.

Plans are at early stage, he says, but include harnessing the "momentous amounts of data" he has at the ARGC to build software that could effectively regulate a woman's IVF drug regime according to input from blood and hormone tests. Teams around the country could then employ a remote version of his methods, which rely more than other clinics on monitoring during critical periods of the IVF cycle and individually tailored drug regimens.

The news will delight Taranissi's supporters, who number many hundreds of women whose babies began life at the ARGC. But some within the IVF sector will look upon it with dismay.

Taranissi has long been a maverick, a divisive figure whose self-devised techniques have provoked strong criticism from within the industry. He has won court battles for libel from the sector's regulatory body, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), and the BBC, which in 2007 broadcast an apparently damning undercover Panorama programme.

Nine cases referred by the HFEA to the police for criminal investigation were quashed that same year, and a disciplinary hearing before the General Medical Council involving two patients who complained they were mistreated was abandoned for lack of evidence.

**Babies galore:** Mohamed Taranissi claims his clinic has outperformed all others for the past 15 years



Taranissi describes his troubles with the HFEA understatedly as "a clash of personalities". Not one of their charges against him has stuck.

Today, sitting at his messy desk in an office that would be very grand were it not so cluttered with thank you cards and pictures of newborn babies and coffee mugs, he insists that his success rates speak for themselves. "If you look at our history we have the highest success rate in the country every year from the day we started in 1995."

In 2010, according to the HFEA, Taranissi's success rate was the best in the country, with women under 35 and those aged 40-42 about twice as likely to go home with a baby after treatment at the ARGC than at the average UK clinic.

Taranissi claims the ARGC has forged a reputation as "the last chance saloon", where couples who have been through many failed cycles of fertility treatment come for one more try. They pay top dollar for it. Taranissi's prices are no more expensive than most clinics for a basic IVF package but the many diagnostic tests he insists on bump up the cost. You could easily spend £10,000 at the ARGC for an initial cycle of IVF, and many couples pay more.

Taranissi is unapologetic, though also defensive: "If someone has failed many times you need to make the right diagnosis and do the right investigation... I don't see how I can be criticised for doing a proper job." But the potential cost perhaps explains why most women

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don't try the ARGC first. That is what Taranissi wants to change.

"When I look at the success rate for the small percentage of people who do start the journey here, often the less complicated cases, it is phenomenal. Something like 84 per cent across all ages. So in fact the system we have developed is most useful to women at the beginning of their IVF experience. I understand that it is not always possible to come to this building every day for two weeks – you might live in Scotland or have work commitments – so we have to bring the treatment to them."

If he's right about the 84 per cent, incidentally, it's astounding – more than triple the national average.

**Y**OU get the feeling this might be Taranissi's push for the medical history books before he withdraws from his daily, hands-on round. As things are now, he pretty much defines the notion of workaholic. Twice married, he has five children of his own, aged between 12 and 30, but has barely seen them grow up. The paradox is plain: the man who has helped create many thousands of cherished babies has seldom been around to cherish his own.

Does he feel guilty? "That's definitely something that crosses my mind sometimes," he says slowly. "As you grow older, and they grow older, they start telling you things and you look back and think, 'Okay, maybe I wasn't there in the way I should have been'. I had a conversation with my eldest daughter yesterday, and she was telling me about events in her life 10 years ago, when I wasn't there. I had forgotten all about them but it must have meant a lot to her because she remembered it all clearly."

He sounds rather amazed by this, as though the notion of childhood disappointment, the longing for a father's presence, are new concepts.

His own childhood perhaps explains it. Taranissi was born into a wealthy Egyptian family and brought up in the comfortable environment of the Cairo medical establishment – largely by nannies. "Maybe I misread the situation [with my own children] because my mother was a doctor and my father was here and there with business and I never saw much of them. I never felt that I was neglected. I always thought we were in a very fortunate situation." Again he looks momentarily perplexed.

He did not want to be a doctor but it was that kind of family and he was effectively pushed into it. Taranissi trained as a gynaecological oncologist but "there was always something sad about the patients' situations". As a junior doctor he loved obstetrics, where by contrast you "could see and hear the joy in people" and decided that his career lay in fertility treatment.

He insists that his approach has always been woman-centred. Last month the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence issued draft guidelines raising the age at which women could access IVF on the NHS from 39 to 42, which he says is "obviously good" in principle but pointless in practice if local waiting lists for IVF are two or three years long. "If you're 42, you need to have the treatment straightaway."

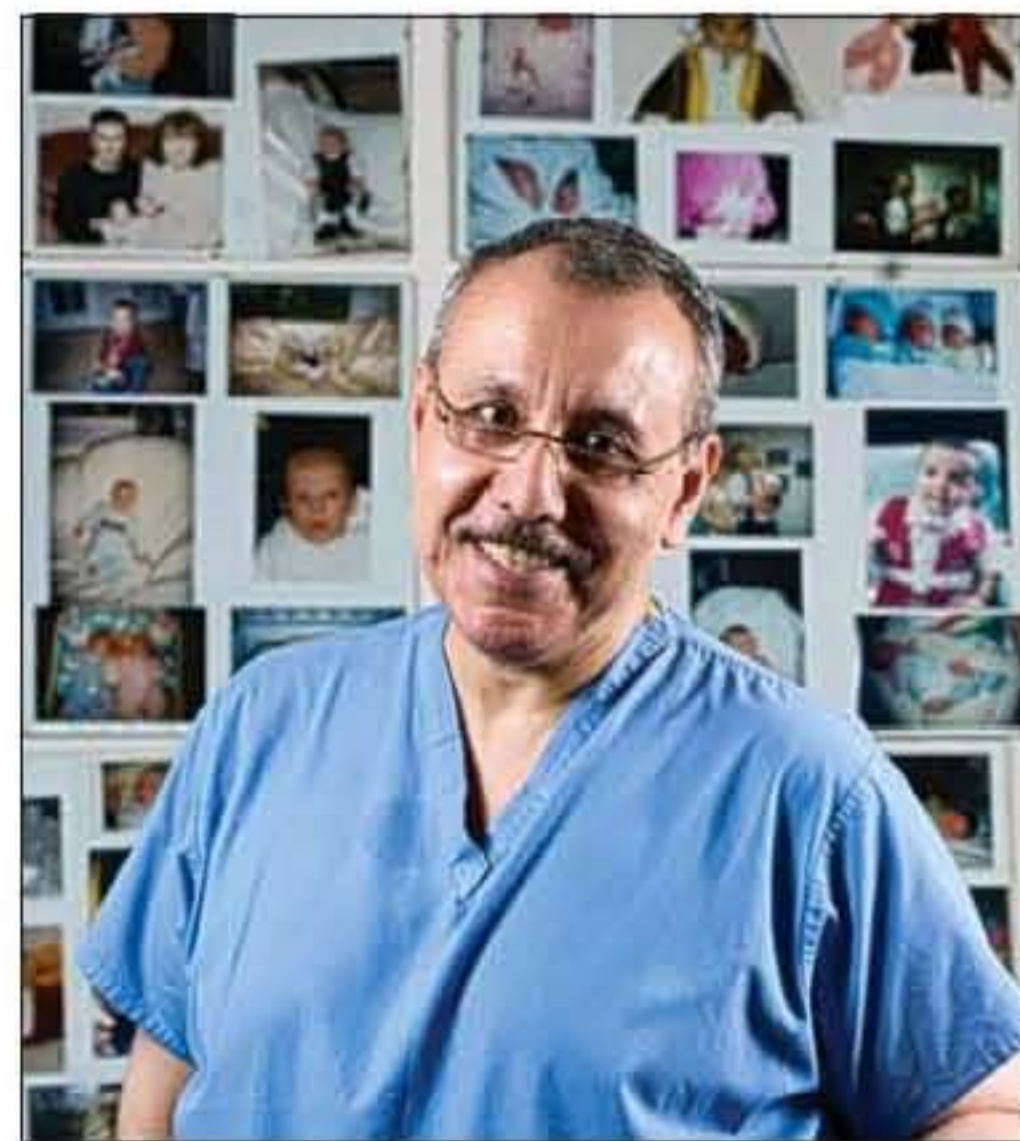
Having a baby is a right, he believes, and the NHS should offer IVF without restriction. "Infertility is a medical problem that requires attention. If you get a disease, should you just stay at home and not waste taxpayers' money because it is God's wish? Of course not. You have the right to be healthy and you

**'You have the right to be healthy, and you should have the right to have infertility treatment'**

should have the right to have infertility treatment. It's the same thing."

Mental health is an issue too. Taranissi watched "strong, successful people" break down because they can't have a baby. "I've seen London people at the top of their careers – famous people, even, who are portrayed as a glowing success and envied by everyone – and it tears them to pieces. It cuts across all sectors of society but perhaps infertility becomes even more accentuated in the minds of women who have everything they want except a baby."

If his plans work, the Taranissi method may become an option for many more. "You have to make sure that you can develop and improve on whatever you do... when you lose your goals, then it is time to go."



Rich legacy: Mohamed Taranissi in his London clinic

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