

NEWS

Pregnant surrogates 'left in the lurch' after RCMP raid fertility consultant's office



TOM BLACKWELL | Mar 1, 2012 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: Mar 1, 2012 12:34 AM ET
[More from Tom Blackwell](#) | [@tomblackwellNP](#)

The RCMP have launched an unprecedented investigation of a fertility-treatment consultant, citing alleged violations of laws that ban the buying and selling of sperm, eggs and the services of surrogate mothers.

Officers raided the eastern Ontario office of Canadian Fertility Consultants last week, and sources in the industry say the business has been effectively shut down, leaving prospective parents and surrogate mothers brought together by the agency in the lurch.

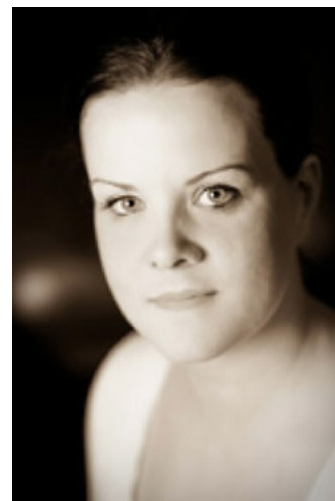
The raid appears to be the first under eight-year-old federal legislation governing the fertility industry, which critics say has been all but ineffective in the face of widespread evidence of black-market trade in egg, sperm and surrogates.

"The shocker is that something finally happened," said Dr. Carl Laskin, past president of the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society. "I think this is absolutely a wake-up call."

Corporal Cathie Glenn, an RCMP spokeswoman, confirmed that offices of the company in Brighton, Ont., 150 kilometres east of Toronto, were searched last Tuesday in an investigation of alleged contraventions of the Assisted Human Reproduction Act and the Criminal Code. Any possible charges could be weeks away, however, she said.

Although the Supreme Court of Canada struck down much of the act last year, it still bans the purchase of sperm or eggs or the services of a surrogate, prohibitions that are also part of the Criminal Code.

Cpl. Glenn would not confirm or deny reports within the fertility business and in Brighton-area media that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation is involved in the case.



Under CEO Leja Handout/Canadian Fertility Consultants Picard, Canadian Fertility Consultants advertises on its website that it is a "full-service" consultancy that helps couples with trouble having children find surrogates, fertility treatment and adoptions.

Related

[Who decides the makings of a modern family?](#)

[A baby at any cost?](#)

That possible American link raises the spectre of the FBI's shocking "baby-selling" prosecution, which resulted in three U.S. lawyers going to jail for arranging to get surrogates pregnant, then offering the soon-to-be-born infants to parents for as much as \$150,000.

The last of the lawyers, Theresa Erickson, was sentenced to five months behind bars in San Diego last Thursday, just two days after the Ontario raid. Darrell Foxworth, an FBI spokesman on the case, said he did not know whether the bureau was involved in the Canadian probe, but noted the agency would not normally confirm any aspect of an ongoing investigation.

Under CEO Leja Picard, Canadian Fertility Consultants (CPC) advertises on its website that it is a "full-service" consultancy that helps couples with trouble having children find surrogates, fertility treatment and adoptions.

No one could be reached at the company's toll-free phone number Wednesday, and the voice-mail box was full. An email went unanswered.

Sally Rhoads-Heinrich, the owner of another agency that handles surrogacy arrangements, said she has been contacted by a number of parents and surrogates who had been working with Ms. Picard, upset that the money she was holding for them in escrow has been frozen.

'The shocker is that something finally happened. I think this is absolutely a wake-up call'

Under Canadian law, surrogate mothers cannot receive a fee, but can be reimbursed for expenses if they provide receipts, a process usually carried out privately by would-be parents and their surrogate. CPC had parents hand over tens of thousands of dollars to cover expenses up front, then doled it out to the surrogates as receipts came in, said Ms. Rhoads-Heinrich, of the agency Surrogacy in Canada.

Now they are complaining that the money is unavailable, she said.

“They’ve all been left in the lurch for eight or nine days now,” said Ms. Rhoads-Heinrich. “There are a lot of pregnant surrogates who have been left without any support. They’re very angry.... They’re without their expense money because she’s not there to give it to them.”

‘There are a lot of pregnant surrogates who have been left without any support’

Meanwhile, some of the country’s top fertility doctors are complaining that the agency’s website indicated Ms. Picard had worked with them, when they say they never had any dealings with her.

Dr. Al Yuzpe, head of the Genesis Fertility Centre in Vancouver, said he had met Ms. Picard once at a meeting when she approached him and offered her card. He said he told her that his clinic does not deal with what he called “brokers,” believing they violate the legislation’s ban on commercial transactions around reproductive treatment.

“I told her she was doing something that was not appropriate,” recalled Dr. Yuzpe. “She says, ‘Well, OK.’ ”

Although many in the fertility industry believe that the payment ban is unnecessary and has needlessly complicated the process, it is important that doctors and others abide by the law, said Dr. Laskin.

At his Lifequest clinic in Toronto, patients are told that if the facility discovers illegal payment has been exchanged for donated eggs or sperm or for a surrogate, treatment will be cancelled, he said.

Despite the ban, it is not difficult to find Canadians openly advertising donor sperm, eggs and embryos and surrogate services on the Internet. Diane Allen of the Infertility Network support group has said she has repeatedly asked the Assisted Human Reproduction Agency to investigate reports of such activity but little is ever done.

If the agency suspects a crime might have occurred, it hands over the file to the RCMP. To date, no charges have ever been laid.

National Post

• Email: tblackwell@nationalpost.com

Popular Stories



Chinese citizens demand refunds...



A PQ government would strengthen...



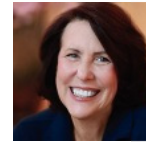
Curiosity made it to Mars, now what?



Sick of Wi-Fi: The debate over wireless...



Paul Ryan's foreign policy, national...



Why overparenti could be as bad :

Topics: [Canada](#), [News](#), [Blackwell On Health](#), [Canadian Fertility Consultants](#), [Carl Laskin](#), [Leia Picard](#), [Science & Health](#)