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Research Article

Behind the IVF Clinic Doors: Employment Structure, Patient Experience, and Hidden Gaps in Fertility Care

Marketa Häkkinen*

Medi-Gyn Fertility S.R.O., Czech Republic

***Corresponding Author:** Marketa Häkkinen, Medi-Gyn Fertility S.R.O., Czech Republic.

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Abstract

In vitro fertilization (IVF) is among the most expensive and emotionally demanding treatments in modern medicine.

Couples may spend €12,000–15,000 per cycle once hidden costs such as medications, cryopreservation, and genetic testing are included [1,2]. Yet despite this investment, patients rarely receive dedicated genetic counseling, structured education, or holistic lifestyle support. Instead, embryologists and coordinators are overstretched into roles far beyond their training, leading to fragmented care and increased risk of laboratory errors [3,4].

Clinics advertise packages that appear comprehensive but exclude essential services, while simultaneously charging extra for lifestyle guidance and advanced technologies. This article examines the reality "behind the doors" of IVF clinics — where the money goes, how employment structures affect care, and what gaps leave patients unsupported.

It proposes the introduction of a new role, the IGLC (IVF, Genetic, Lifestyle Counselor), to deliver personalized guidance, reduce repeated failed cycles, and restore the human dimension of fertility care.

Keywords: IVF; Genetic Counseling; Embryology; Patient Experience; Fertility Care; Lifestyle

Introduction

IVF has transformed reproductive medicine, offering millions of couples hope for parenthood. But for patients, the journey is often defined not only by medical procedures, but by overwhelming financial, physical, and emotional strain. Package prices suggest clarity — "IVF cycle €6,500" — yet the reality is starkly different. Most couples finish a cycle having spent double or more, while still lacking basic support [1].

On average, couples require 3.5 IVF cycles to achieve one live birth [2]. For many, this means an investment of €30,000–40,000 over time. Without personalized guidance, repeated failures accumulate not only financial loss but deep psychological scars.

The illusion of package pricing

A typical advertised IVF package may be €6,500. Patients are led to believe this covers their journey, but in reality, the true cost easily doubles.

Final cost per cycle: €12,000–15,000+ [1,2]. And still not included: structured education, genetic counseling, emotional or lifestyle guidance.

….. "Where the money goes "?

Employment structure in IVF clinics

Behind the package, the employment structure explains why patients feel unsupported. Doctors manage medical decisions

Item	Advertised Package	Actual Cost (Added Fees)
IVF cycle (retrieval + 1 transfer, basic lab work)	€6,500	Included
Medications	–	€1,000–2,000
Monitoring (bloods, ultrasounds beyond basic)	–	€300–500
Cryopreservation of surplus embryos	–	€500–1,000
Annual embryo storage	–	€200–500
Genetic testing (PGT)	–	€2,000–4,000
Frozen embryo transfer (later cycle)	–	€1,500–2,500
Time-lapse incubator	–	€500–1,000

Table

and procedures. Embryologists handle the core laboratory tasks: cleaning oocytes, performing ICSI, culturing embryos, managing cryopreservation. Their focus should be precision. Coordinators organize appointments, consent forms, and communications. But in practice, coordinators are overloaded, and embryologists are asked to explain test results or call patients. This dual pressure distracts specialists from their primary roles. In embryology, distraction is dangerous: overworked staff handling delicate gametes and embryos increases the risk of human error [3]. Witnessing systems and electronic safeguards reduce but do not eliminate risks caused by excessive workload [4]. With oocytes and embryos being so precious — often a patient's last chance — this structure is unsustainable.

Patient experience: The hidden gaps

Consider the story of a 36-year-old woman undergoing her first IVF cycle. She paid €6,500 for a package but was later billed for medications (€1,800), cryopreservation (€600), embryo storage (€300), and PGT testing (€2,500). By the end, her costs exceeded €12,000. After her embryo transfer failed, she was left with unanswered questions: Why did it not work? Should she change protocols? Were there hidden genetic or lifestyle factors? No one provided structured guidance. Her coordinator was apologetic but overworked; the embryologist was busy in the lab.

Her experience is not unique. Patients describe feeling financially drained and emotionally abandoned. They pay €12,000–15,000 per cycle. They are offered lifestyle consultations, nutrition programs, or emotional support, but only for extra fees. Even large, renowned clinics underinvest in technology. For example, a leading European center such as IVI Barcelona may have only 3–4 time-lapse incubators available, charging €500–1,000 extra per patient for access [5]. Psychological stress and lack of structured counseling are well-documented to affect both treatment adherence and emotional well-being [6,7]. Yet clinics rarely include counseling as part of the package, leaving patients mentally vulnerable in one of the most stressful journeys of their lives.

The case for change: Introducing the IGLC role

The missing link is a dedicated professional whose only focus is guiding patients. The IGLC (IVF, Genetic, Lifestyle Counselor) would: take family history and recommend targeted genetic tests (karyotyping, carrier screening, DNA fragmentation, PGT guidance); educate patients about each step of IVF, including costs and realistic success rates; provide lifestyle recommendations (nutrition, exercise, supplements, stress management); and offer emotional navigation so patients do not feel abandoned. Benefits for clinics include relief of embryologists and coordinators from non-core tasks (fewer errors and greater efficiency), improved patient trust and satisfaction, prevention of unnecessary repeat cycles by addressing root causes, and market differentiation. Just as anesthesiologists became a standard part of surgical teams, IGLCs should become a standard role in fertility clinics. ESHRE has already recognized the need for genetic counseling in ART [8], and lifestyle interventions are well-documented to improve reproductive outcomes [9]. Integrating both into a single professional role reflects the true needs of modern IVF.

Future outlook

IVF billing must become transparent: patients deserve to know where their money goes. Guidelines such as those from ESHRE should recognize genetic counseling and lifestyle guidance as integral to IVF, not optional extras. Clinics that adopt the IGLC model will not only improve patient satisfaction, but also success rates — because education, stress reduction, and personalized care directly influence biological outcomes.

Conclusion

Behind the IVF clinic doors, patients discover a gap between what they pay and what they receive. Packages mask hidden costs, employment structures stretch staff beyond their limits, and essential human-centered care is missing. Couples invest not only money but their hopes, emotions, and futures. It is time to rebalance IVF. Alongside advanced laboratories, we must place education, love, understanding, and support at the heart of fertility care. By introducing the IGLC role and making counseling a right, not an add-on, clinics can evolve into environments where patients are not just numbers or cycles, but human beings guided toward parenthood with dignity and clarity. Patients need the new role of the IGLC because success rates in IVF have remained largely unchanged for the past 15 years. This role would bring structured education, personalized IVF and genetic guidance, and integrated lifestyle and mental support into clinics. Ultimately, the quality of oocytes and sperm is strongly influenced by patient awareness and habits. Without guidance, many couples only begin to adopt healthy changes after repeated failed cycles. By integrating IGLCs into the care pathway, clinics can empower patients earlier, improve biological quality, reduce the need for 3–4 cycles, and finally achieve higher success rates while protecting couples from avoidable suffering.

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