

Megan Agnew, September 16 2024, *The Times* (abridged)

Want a girl with blue eyes? Inside California's VIP IVF industry

Faith Hartley always wanted two girls — a blonde and a redhead. “I thought, I’ll have one that looks like me,” says Hartley, 35, smoothing her golden hair in the Los Angeles valley home she shares with her husband, Neil Robertson, 49, a redheaded Scottish tech entrepreneur. “And he can have one that looks like him.” [...] And through Californian mom friends she discovered that if she chose in vitro fertilisation (IVF) in the state she could pick the sex of her child — one of the very few places in the world where this is legal. She was undeterred by the cost. In fact she hoped you could pick other traits too. “I thought, we have one redhead, let’s have a blonde. But my doctor said you can’t do that — yet. So then we were, like, OK, we’ll just have the girl.”

The couple received one round of IVF treatment at the Southern California Reproductive Center, which cost about \$30,000 (£23,000) [...] effectively the price of guaranteeing Hartley got her second girl. It worked. [...] “It was perfect,” Hartley says. “Bardot has my features, so I have my mini-me and Neil has his. So I got what I wanted in the end.”

Welcome to California, fertility capital of the world. Thanks to many years of liberal regulation, as well as a free market, the state’s fertility industry is booming. This is where wealthy people from around the world wanting babies flock to, willing to pay the big bucks. Regulation is relaxed. The state permits commercialised surrogacy (which can cost up to \$100,000 plus living expenses), egg donation (some donors charge up to \$150,000) and sperm donation (\$5,000) — as well as selection of sex and, in some

instances, eye colour (\$30,000).

California has 92 fertility clinics, the most of any US state. There’s so much demand that doctors cannot be trained fast enough. [...] It all starts to look like the family planning version of Silicon Valley’s obsession with the science of biohacking. Already there are clinics offering full-scale genetic tests that can analyse an embryo’s predisposition to more than 600 diseases and conditions. [...]

Dr Jeffrey Steinberg is an IVF doctor based in Los Angeles who is in favour of offering embryo screening and selection for nonmedical reasons. [...] “India wants all boys,” he says sitting at his desk, on which is a pack of business cards covered with pictures of babies. “China wanted boys but now they want girls, because they’re out of girls. The US and UK are very close to 50-50, with a small lean towards girls.”

[...] In a laboratory freezer somewhere in California he has some important blood. Steinberg had helped a high-ranking coach at the National Basketball Association and his wife get pregnant with “a blue-eyed girl”, and the coach — at Steinberg’s request — encouraged a trail of his exceptionally tall professional players to donate their blood. Height is not yet a trait that can be selected, but Steinberg’s hope is that researchers will be able to compare the pro-players’ genes to a “normal” person’s and one day offer prospective parents the ability to select an embryo that will grow into a tall adult. [...]