EctoLife: Concept Unveiled for the World’s First Artificial Womb Facility

Description

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In late 2021, Elon Musk tweeted his fears about the end of humanity. “We should be much more worried about population collapse….If there aren’t enough people for Earth, then there definitely won’t be enough for Mars,” he opined. Musk’s statements brought the world’s falling birthrate to the forefront of social consciousness.

For nearly a century, fertility rates have been decreasing globally. The result is what scientists are describing as a “worldwide infertility crisis.” But there’s a solution looming on the horizon — artificial wombs.

In 2017, scientists created a “BioBag” that functioned as an artificial womb, and they used it to grow a baby lamb. Now, a new concept has been unveiled showing how the same could be done for humans. In recently released footage, Hashem Al-Ghaili shows what childbirth might look like tomorrow. Specifically, he created an artificial womb facility named EctoLife.

Its purpose? In an exclusive interview with *Science and Stuff*, Al-Ghaili says he thinks the EctoLife concept could one day supplant traditional birth. In so doing, he said society would finally be able to meet the needs of parents who are “tired of waiting for a response from an adoption agency” and those who are “worried about pregnancy complications.” But most importantly, he says EctoLife could allow us to confront the infertility crisis head-on.

Our need for a new form of birth

Currently, the World Health Organization estimates that 15% of reproductive-aged couples worldwide are affected by infertility. Indeed, over the last 70 years, fertility rates worldwide have decreased by a staggering 50%. Reasons for this decline include (among other things) women’s increased education, increases in employment, the high cost of raising children, and a drop in global sperm count. 23 countries are already at risk, with Japan, Spain, Portugal, Thailand, and South Korea at the forefront of the crisis.

In the U.S., infertility statistics are likewise sobering:

1 in 8 American couples has issues with fertility.

12-15% of all couples are unable to conceive after a year of unprotected sex.

10% of all couples are unable to conceive after two years of unprotected sex.

33% of Americans have turned to fertility treatments or know someone who has.

Replying to Musk's tweet, the tech investor Sahil Lavingia wrote, "We should be investing in technology that makes having kids much faster/easier/cheaper/more accessible. Synthetic wombs, etc." And that is exactly what Al-Ghaili was thinking when he came up with the design for EctoLife. Al-Ghaili told *Science and Stuff* that he was inspired to create the concept of EctoLife in order to further "the discussion around a technology that shouldn't be ignored."

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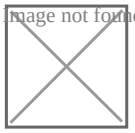

According to Al-Ghaili, the artificial womb concept of EctoLife would be life-changing for many who struggle to conceive. "It's a perfect solution for women who [have] had their uterus surgically removed due to cancer or other complications. It could also help solve issues that stem from low sperm count," Al-Ghaili said enthusiastically, adding that the EctoLife concept (or technologies like it) "could ultimately make miscarriage a thing of the past."

Science fiction becomes reality

Synthetic wombs might sound like the stuff of science fiction, but they follow in a long line of advancements in reproductive technology. On July 25, 1978, a baby girl named Louise Brown was born at Oldham and District General Hospital in Manchester, England. What made her birth memorable was that Louise was conceived in a petri dish, and she is the first baby conceived through *in vitro fertilization* (IVF).

Louise's mother had a mature egg removed from one of her ovaries, and it was combined with Louise's father's sperm. The resulting embryo was then transferred to Mrs. Brown's uterus. Nine months later, Louise was born. The Browns went on to conceive a second daughter, Natalie, also through IVF. In May 1999, Natalie made history when she became the first IVF baby to give birth to a child of her own. In December 2006, Louise followed suit, delivering a healthy baby boy.

Today, more than 8 million children are conceived through IVF annually.

The 2017 BioBag was an enormous breakthrough in artificial womb technology. The scientists behind the work grew eight fetal lambs for 105 to 120 days — about equivalent to human fetuses at 22 to 24 weeks of gestation. Then in March 2021, another milestone was achieved. Israeli scientists were able to grow mouse embryos for up to eleven days inside artificial wombs. What is remarkable about that achievement is that 11 days is over half of the full mouse gestational term.

Al-Ghaili says the EctoLife concept is just the logical next step. And he's not the only one who thinks so.

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"It seems probable that we are only several years away from testing [aritfical wombs] on human subjects," Social Ethics and Policy Academic Elizabeth Chloe Romanis wrote in the BMJ's *Journal Of Medical Ethics*. Meanwhile, Dr. Carlo Bulletti, Associate Professor at Yale University's Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Reproductive Science Department, thinks that a fully functioning artificial womb could be realized within the next 10 years.

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