

Startups are the best route to change in the fertility sector

I'd already dedicated over a decade of my career to working in fertility laboratories and clinics when I decided to leave them behind. Or, more accurately, when I realised that the only way to drive the urgent change needed within the sector was to approach it from a different angle.

Infertility affects an estimated 1 in 7 heterosexual couples across the UK. And yet, despite how commonplace it is for individuals to have difficulty conceiving, all too often within our current healthcare system their fertility journeys are stalled before they've even begun.

Currently, the fertility treatment options offered to these couples through the NHS are limited to Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) – a technique also known as artificial insemination – or In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) – where fertilisation takes place in a laboratory environment. That's if you qualify for treatment. In order to meet the NHS's criteria for IVF, you must be under 35 years old, under a specific BMI, living in a specific postcode, and childless. The system can also be very hard for single parents or same-sex couples to navigate.

The disparities only widen from this point. Those who do not qualify for treatment on the NHS must cover the costs themselves, and when you're looking at spending £5,000 on one round of IVF alone, or £1,500 for a single IUI

treatment, only a select few can afford to progress.

Working in clinics, the inequalities and shortcomings of the system were laid bare in front of me. I knew there had to be a better option. At the same time, I knew it would never be possible to bring a solution to fruition from my current standpoint.

For all the vital and hard work that goes into it, the *fertility sector is marred by red tape*, riddled with bureaucracy and plagued by a lack of funding. All this means that the adoption of new technologies and methods can take decades; the very antithesis of the startup ecosystem. So whilst it was never my ambition to launch a new solution, I soon realised that it was the only way to remedy the issues I'd become so disillusioned by.

It's since taken just two years to build a team of like-minded innovators and launch Béa Fertility – the first clinical standard at-home fertility kit. Béa uses the effective but often overlooked “IntraCervical Insemination” (ICI) method to offer affordable and non-invasive treatment to people trying to conceive. Our product has been through over 100 iterations in the short time since we launched. Only a startup environment could have progressed things so quickly.

Besides the ability to pool knowledge and collaborate with people from different professional backgrounds, the agile nature of startups provides unparalleled freedom and flexibility. When you're developing a market-shifting product and coming up against inevitable challenges along the way, this is essential.

Of course, funding is a driving factor in all this. In the public healthcare system, funding to develop new solutions and projects is scarce, and accessing it can be an incredibly difficult and drawn out process. The funding which is available through VCs, and the relative speed at which it can be unlocked, is what sets startups apart.

For femtechs, being able to allocate significant chunks of time and money to targeting specific issues in women's health is what makes it possible to create the most patient-focused and effective solutions. It's also what enables us to do so at pace. This could not be more critical in a sector where change is so urgently needed by patients. Certainly for us, our vision to democratise fertility was brought to life by the world of investors and VC.

We can't ignore the fact that we have the solutions needed to improve experiences and outcomes for patients at our very fingertips. As startups, we have a key role to play in pushing the wider sector to innovate alongside us; to bring products and services into the hands of the people they will help the most. Working on this side, I have a chance to help drive widespread change. More so than I ever have done before.

David O'Rourke, Embryologist and cofounder of [Béa Fertility](#)

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