

# Barwin's Babies

3 X 60 Doc Series

*"You should be thankful that you exist. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't even be here."*



## PITCH

Barwin's Babies tells the shocking story of a celebrated fertility doctor who, in the 2010s, was discovered to have impregnated dozens of women with the wrong sperm – in many cases, his own sperm. Told in the style of elevated true crime series like *Wild, Wild Country*, the series recounts Barwin's deceptions over a 30-year period in dramatic fashion, exposing deep flaws in fertility medicine worldwide, and the cascading effect of his actions on dozens of families.



Each of one 'Barwin's babies' – his unknowing offspring – has a unique story about how they found out who their biological father was and when and where it happened. Woven throughout the narrative are their gut-wrenching stories, told through first person interviews and stylish re-enactments. As they struggle to reconcile their new realities with their past ideas about who they were, these young men and women are denied justice, answers - even a basic acknowledgement of wrongdoing. That is, until the newfound siblings (now in their 20s and 30s) connect with each other across time zones and continents. People who were just strangers a few years ago are today as close as siblings can be, providing emotional support for each other throughout life's major challenges - divorces, family tragedies, and deaths. Together they are pushing for fertility medicine to have more transparency and oversight, and at long last, in 2021 they succeeded in launching a precedent-setting class action lawsuit against Barwin. But this fight for justice continues to be more elusive than anyone could have imagined.

## SYNOPSIS

Life. All that's required is a sperm and an egg.

It sounds simple, beautiful, and natural. But so often it is anything but. Millions of couples around the world struggle to conceive naturally. And when they do, they turn to fertility doctors. These 'baby gods' give families the greatest gift of all – life itself.

**FERTILITY DOCTORS YIELD  
TREMENDOUS POWER.  
WHEN THEIR POWER IS  
UNCHECKED, BAD THINGS HAPPEN.**

Enter Dr. Norman Barwin, a South African-born man who became Canada's most respected fertility doctor in the 1980s and 1990s. He won the Order of Canada, he helped hundreds of couples conceive children biologically through IVF (in vitro fertilization) treatment and helped many more women conceive through sperm donors. He volunteered his time to countless charities and causes related to safe sex and fertility. He was an accomplished marathon runner well into his 60s.

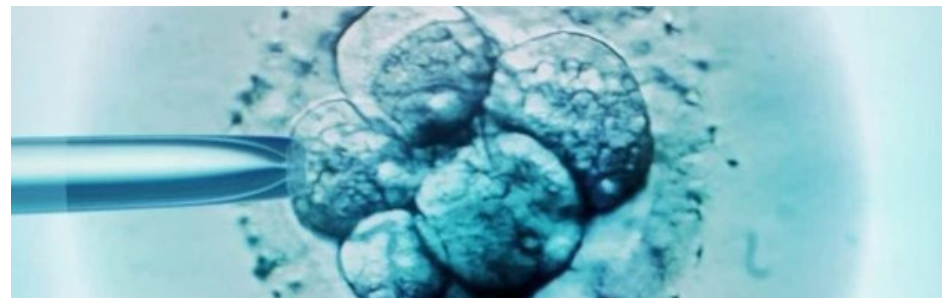
**Barwin was quite simply: a Rockstar.**

Warning signs started popping up as early as the mid 1980s. Claims against Barwin about professional misconduct were 'disappeared' by members of the medical establishment and financial settlements were made out of court. In the public eye, he remained the toast of the town.



In the 1990s, Barwin expanded his clinical work to include freezing men's sperm before they underwent radiation therapy for cancer. The service allowed men to have biological children with their partner using their own sperm years after radiation had potentially reduced their reproductive abilities. And of course, Barwin's bank continued to supply sperm from hundreds of anonymous donors.

**THEN IN 2015, IT ALL CAME  
TO A SCREECHING HALT.**





Rebecca Dixon, a 22-year-old Ottawa woman did an ancestry test and was surprised to find out she was half Jewish, even though her parents were English and Scottish. The couple had seen Barwin in the 1980s for IVF treatment using the father's sperm. With more research, Rebecca discovered dozens of DNA-matched relatives through the ancestry site. All of them were related to Dr. Barwin.



Rebecca Dixon

***DR. BARWIN WAS HER BIOLOGICAL FATHER.***

Rebecca and her parents were stunned, and when Barwin denied any wrongdoing, the family went public. The family fallout was severe, with Rebecca's father taking the news particularly badly. His mental and physical health began to decline rapidly. Rebecca would say of that time:



Rebecca with her parents, Davina & Dan Dixon

***"I'D LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND NOT KNOW WHO I WAS. I DIDN'T IDENTIFY WITH THE PHYSICAL PERSON LOOKING BACK AT ME. AND I WAS ASHAMED TO BE RELATED TO THE PERSON I'M RELATED TO."***

Around this same time, news reports began to emerge that Barwin's accomplishments at various marathons were under scrutiny. There were allegations of cheating in both the Boston and Ottawa marathons, where he had finished in the top 5 for his age category. High profile members of the public were quick to rush to his defense, claiming that Barwin was the victim of a journalistic witch hunt – a smear job. How could such a respected community leader be accused of such petty cheating? When the investigations concluded, Barwin was stripped of his medals. He had been caught skipping marathon checkpoints – jumping in taxis to skip ahead.

When 24-year-old Kat Palmer heard about Rebecca Dixon's discovery, she noticed that she too bore a striking resemblance to the fertility doctor her parents had seen in the 1980s. Her family believed that Kat's father was her biological father, but they all agreed to a DNA test – even Dr. Barwin himself. The results were conclusive: Barwin was Kat's biological father. Like many of Barwin's babies, Kat had grown up always feeling - and looking - a little different than the rest of her family. This new revelation kicked off a long journey of self-discovery and complicated her already complicated relationship with her father.



Kat Palmer, Dr. Barwin, Rebecca Dixon

Over the next 8 years, dozens more families would be shaken to their core, discovering their children were not biologically related to their fathers. In some cases, the biological father was somebody no one had ever heard of. In many cases, the father was Dr. Barwin. People were outraged, including the men who had survived cancer and were told they could still have children of their own. Barwin's clinic and sperm bank were shut down, but he was still allowed to consult with patients and maintain his credentials.

Nobody got answers - not from Barwin, and not from the government or the professional associations and regulatory bodies that oversee medical professionals. Fertility is a mostly unregulated area of medicine around the world, and according to the letter of the law, Barwin hadn't done anything wrong. Women came to him to have a child, and they did.

***DR. BARWIN COULD NOT BE CHARGED WITH A CRIME. LAW ENFORCEMENT DID NOTHING TO HELP.***



When confronted about his misdeeds, Barwin told Kat Palmer, ***“You should be thankful that you exist. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't even be here.”***



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A few years later, Dr. Barwin would retire comfortably in his large suburban home. By all accounts, he lives a peaceful life and is often spotted buying groceries by his former patients and their families in the community.

And that is just the beginning of the story. What was Barwin thinking all those years? Why did he do what he did? Was he power-hungry? Was he evil?



As Barwin's babies began connecting over their shared trauma, they would ultimately launch the first class action lawsuit of its kind against a disgraced fertility doctor anywhere in the world. As of 2021, a tentative settlement has been reached between the plaintiffs (led by Rebecca Dixon) and Barwin's insurance company. Once formalized, it will be the first public acknowledgement that something went wrong, even though the money involved is minimal, and Barwin himself does not have to accept any culpability. What's more, only the parents are entitled to receive any funds, as they did not receive the full intended 'service' they had purchased.

The court has given no legal recognition to Barwin's babies themselves, highlighting that an unborn life technically has no rights.

Barwin's Babies the series concludes by exploring the implication of this ruling, and some of these ethical questions, about the rights we have to be who we are and who we want to be, and how much our DNA should or should not define us.



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