



Australian parents warn reality of Ukrainian surrogacy doesn't always match the dream

By [Tracy Bowden](#) and Foreign Correspondent

Updated 21 Aug 2019, 7:19am



[Photo: Adaline and Ida Williams were born to a surrogate mother in Ukraine. \(Supplied: Marie Williams\)](#)

Two couples who had children through surrogates in Ukraine are warning prospective parents to do their research thoroughly before choosing an agency to help facilitate it.

"We absolutely think overseas surrogacy is a great pathway," mother of surrogate twins Louise Pitcher told 7.30.

"We just think there are safer ways to do this, particularly in providing people [with] as much information as possible."

The Pitchers, and another couple, have raised a series of concerns about surrogate company Lotus, including treatment of the surrogates, the lack of information and support and unexpected or uncovered medical expenses.

Reproductive law specialist Dr Sonia Allan from Deakin University has a number of concerns about overseas surrogacy.

She said low incomes in Ukraine, where women earn as little as \$3,000 a year, and issues around the legality of the practice in Australia, made for a complex situation.

"[There are] so many implications for the women being used as a surrogate, and for the children being born and brought back to Australia," she said.

'This was our last option to have a family'



[Photo: For Louise and Dale Pitcher, seeking a surrogate in Ukraine was their "last option" to have a family of their own. \(ABC News: Chris Gillette\)](#)

After treatment for cancer, Ms Pitcher was unable to have children, but along with her husband Dale, had created precious embryos via IVF when she was first diagnosed.

Mr Pitcher went along to an information session by Sam Everingham, who runs a not-for-profit support and education organisation called Growing Families (formerly known as Families through Surrogacy).

"Dale came home really excited, like, 'this is it, we can have a baby',"

Mr Pitcher said: "This was our last option to have a family of our own."

The Pitchers said they were advised by Mr Everingham to go with an agency called Lotus.

"As far as Sam's sales pitch is concerned, it is predominantly Lotus," Ms Pitcher said.

They took Mr Everingham's advice and a surrogate mother was arranged in Ukraine.

They said at first Lotus was in regular contact, but once the surrogate became pregnant, the level of communication dropped.



[Photo: Dale and Louise Pitcher are thrilled with their twins but think the process could have been better. \(Supplied: Louise Pitcher\)](#)

Their twins, Flynn and Ivy, were born very premature, with bleeding on the brain, and one child needed surgery.

The couple said a lack of interpreters meant they struggled to understand what was happening.

And Lotus requested more and more cash.

"Get this much money, this time in US currency, this time in Ukrainian currency," Ms Pitcher said she was told by Lotus representatives.

"Once you are over there, in that position of vulnerability, they can basically charge whatever they want and take advantage of you."

The initial estimate for the Pitchers' surrogacy process was \$90,000. In the end they paid more than \$140,000.

Concerns over agency



Photo: Lotus Surrogacy promises a "special journey to parenthood". (ABC News)

After a number of countries, among them Thailand and India, banned commercial surrogacy for foreigners, [Ukraine in eastern Europe has become the go-to location for couples exploring overseas surrogacy.](#)

Lotus is an international surrogacy agency registered in Israel, and founded and owned by lawyer Dana Magdassi.

It calls itself the leading surrogacy agency for Australian clients.

Galina Kubarska worked for Lotus in Ukraine for four months, finding and supporting surrogate mothers, but left because of the way they were treated.

"A surrogate mother who was 24 weeks' pregnant started saying she wasn't feeling very well," she told 7.30.

"Doctors said treatment would be expensive ... the Israeli bosses (Lotus) said they wouldn't treat her.

"She had to have an emergency birth because of infection. If we had provided assistance when she said she wasn't well we could have saved the babies.

"I can't recommend Lotus because of their treatment of the surrogates.

"The parents risk receiving an unhealthy child or being left without a child at all."

'We didn't get the promised care'



[Photo: Marie and Antony Williams with their newborn twins in the hospital room in Ukraine. \(Supplied: Marie Williams\)](#)

Adelaide couple Marie and Antony Williams also sought advice from Mr Everingham.

"He turned around to me and said, 'look if you can afford Lotus, go with them 'cause Lotus is the best. We work with them a lot and I would recommend them over other agencies'," Ms Williams told 7.30.

They spent about \$110,000 including accommodation and flights.

But they were upset at the lack of care for their surrogate after the birth of their twins Ida and Adaline.

"We went to see her the day after the birth and she was still covered in blood, in a nightie covered in blood from the birth and I was appalled," Ms Williams said.

"We were given a lot of promises about what the agency would provide and what care our surrogate would get, and we didn't get that."

Mr Everingham defended the process.

"The system over there works well but people need to realise that no, they are not going to get the level of care for the surrogate they might get here," he said.

"That is just the nature of engagement with cross-border arrangements."

Mr Everingham conceded that overseas surrogacy could be a difficult process.

He estimated that only about one-third of couples involved had a seamless experience.

"Those problems can be miscarriages, failed transfers, early birth, a myriad of things can happen," Mr Everingham said.

"I don't think it's fair for them to say we're going to blame someone who advised us about what options were available if their experience isn't a good one."

'We cannot control all the situations'



[Photo: Sam Everingham says he is trying to "engage with more surrogacy in Australia". \(ABC News: Jerry Rickard\)](#)

According to ASIC, in the past five years, Mr Everingham's company earned \$2 million in revenue. That money came from sponsorships, consulting fees and event ticket sales.

He said Lotus paid to sponsor his seminars and provide an "educational talk".

"We make it clear on our website that we have sponsors and we don't let sponsorships affect who we recommend," he said.

The families are not so sure.

"This is people's life savings and they are trusting Families through Surrogacy (now Growing Families)," Ms Pitcher said.

Mr Everingham responded: "We try to give people the best advice we have at the time but we cannot control all the situations that happen."

"Some people do have tough journeys and that is part of the facts of life in this area."

"We have found with companies like Lotus, when they are taking on lots of clients, people start to have problems, and we are warning people about that now."

"One of the reasons we try and engage with more surrogacy in Australia now is because we don't want so many Australians to be going offshore.

"We feel that these companies are not coping well with the demand."

Commercial surrogacy is illegal in Australia.

Overseas commercial surrogacy is illegal in Queensland, NSW and ACT but it is believed no-one has been charged under this legislation.