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Getting Personal With Brittany Barreto: From One-Time 'Science Hater' To Genetics Doctorate, DNA Dating App And Women's Health Champion

by [Marion Webb](#)

Medtech Insight sat down with Brittany Barreto, CEO of FemHealth Insights, who participated in a panel discussion at SXSW 2023 on the \$1t femtech industry, to talk about her journey to becoming a women's health care champion.

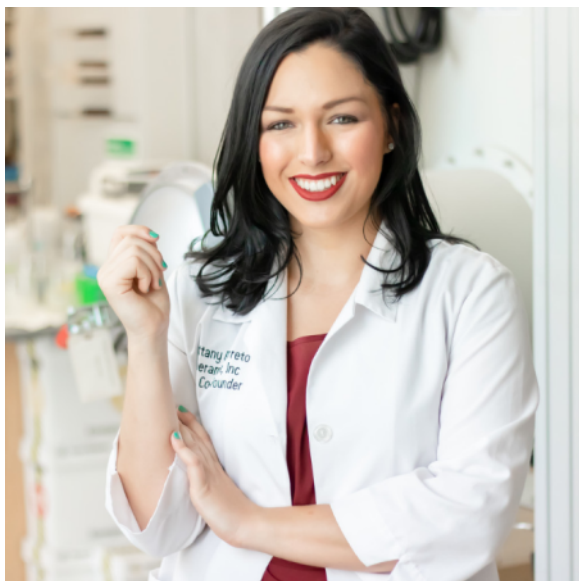
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At last week's SXSW conference, even before the three panelists and *Medtech Insight's* moderator took to the stage to discuss the \$1t femtech industry, Brittany Barreto had already endeared the audience with her affability and charisma, asking the audience about their involvement in femtech and engaging them in lighthearted conversation.

The CEO of FemHealth Insights is clearly passionate about women's health. She's authentic when engaging in conversation, and doesn't mince words either.

Brittany Barreto started her journey into women's health while she was pursuing her doctorate in genetics from Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, TX. Realizing, "I had too much personality to work in a lab my whole life," she began to investigate other career tracks.



Her first venture was a DNA-based dating app to predict attraction based on pheromones. The company Pheramor didn't survive, but, Barreto said, she learned a lot during her first start-up experience, and realized "there were a lot of misunderstandings about female health and consequences of things like daily hormone intake." For instance, studies have shown women on birth control pills were attracted to similar genetics versus the opposite genetics, which required the company to ask if women were on birth control pills, she said. After raising millions of dollars, new rules for the App Store that forbid dating apps from procuring DNA samples from users, the very foundation of Pheramor, eventually led to the firm's demise.

In 2019, Barreto was recruited to Houston-based Capital Factory where she evaluated start-ups, mentored founders and assisted in deal flows. In 2020 at the start of the pandemic, while sitting in her studio apartment isolated from the world, she decided to start the Femtech Focus podcast, interviewing doctors, scientists, entrepreneurs, investors and other experts on a wide variety of topics from fundraising, clinical trials, health policies and regulation to treatments and services for women-specific health conditions. The podcast just celebrated its 200th episode and has grown to 85,000 downloads with listeners in about 120 countries, Barreto said.

Meanwhile, Barreto was building a women's health community and creating a vast database of companies and products in the space. Those assets and her background in fundraising, mentoring and entrepreneurship coalesced into FemHealth Insights, a boutique consulting firm specializing in women's health innovation.

Medtech Insight sat down with Barreto to talk about her journey from an unstable environment in New Jersey to founding her first company Pheramor while pursuing her doctorate in genetics, working in venture capital, and eventually finding her passion in driving women's health issues to the forefront.

This article was lightly edited for length and clarity. The podcast was recorded at SXSW on 10 March following the panel discussion on the \$1t femtech industry featuring panelists Brittany Barreto, Jennifer Fried, partner at VC firm Portfolia, Kimberly Seals Allers, founder of the Irth app, and moderator Marion Webb.

Q *Medtech Insight:* How did you become so passionate about women's health?

A Brittany Barreto: I have a Ph.D. in molecular and human genetics. While I was on my Ph.D., I realized that I had too much personality to work in a lab my whole life and started to investigate other career tracks. And one of those tracks was entrepreneurship. I had always had this crazy idea for a DNA-based dating app where I would match singles based on a cheek swab that looked at genes that can predict attraction through pheromones.

So my first start-up was called Pheramor. After that, I got recruited into venture capital and worked at Capital Factory, the most active fund in Texas. I launched their Houston branch and that's where I started to learn about venture capital and the power of the investor. As a founder you have one product or service, but as an investor you can invest and empower dozens of products and services. And I liked that angle. I discovered this industry called femtech, which is innovation and women's health and wellness. I just thought it was the most important thing in the world. It has a lot of biology and science, hormones, genetics, lifecycles, so the scientist in me just loves femtech. The activist, the feminist in me, also loves femtech.

Q When did you come up with the idea of starting your own women's health-focused podcast?

A Barreto: In 2019, there was only one fund in the world investing in femtech and that was Portfolia. I was like, this is crazy. There's only one fund investing in femtech? So I thought, Ok, I'll get a job at an accelerator. I looked, but there was no such thing as a femtech accelerator. Today, there are four in the world. Also, by the way, today there are six venture funds specifically focused on femtech that have all been formed in the last three years – huge movement.

[At the time] I was like, where's the gravity of femtech? What's happening? Where do I get info? I couldn't find a list of companies. I could not find any data on who was in the space, who was investing, who was successful. That led me down a rabbit hole of my own little research, and I realized, wow, there is a gaping hole here of lack of infrastructure for foundation of innovation in women's health. Another thing I

looked for and couldn't find was a podcast. In March 2020 I said, well, if I have to sit at home in isolation in my studio apartment, I might as well start a podcast. We interview scientist researchers, clinicians, doctors, but definitely also investors and founders. I want to hear the story of how people got there. It's also a deep dive into the condition or the problem that person is solving. So much of women's health is just a big black box and misunderstanding.

Women themselves don't know what's happening, so we cover things like, what is endometriosis? What's the market size? How many women are affected, but also how do women get diagnosed with it? And finding out there is no diagnostic test. (Also see "[Alife Health Leverages AI Tools For IVF To Increase Access, Improve Chances For Successful Pregnancies](#)" - Medtech Insight, 22 Feb, 2023.)

We talk about innovation and the opportunity. So I interview people who are innovating things like diagnostics for endometriosis. We have an episode coming up about women's health for incarcerated women. What do pregnant women in prison do? Do they breastfeed? Where does the baby go? The podcast is just an amazing platform for authentic conversations, sometimes hard conversations too. We talk about data privacy after Roe v. Wade. We talk about black maternal mortality. We also cover topics how women are activating and getting together to provide access to abortion. (Also see "[Telemedicine Among Sticky Wickets As Uncertainty Abounds Post-Roe v. Wade](#)" - Medtech Insight, 14 Jul, 2022.)

Q What are your plans for FemHealth Insights?

A Barreto: So Femtech Focus was the podcast, and then it turned into a virtual community with a big newsletter. I found myself knowing a lot about the femtech world. In fact, I found out I'm one of the very few people who knew what the heck was happening in femtech. So last year, I started to get outreach by large pharmaceutical companies, large biotech companies, large banks, large private equity firms saying, 'Hey, we heard what's happening in early-stage women's health – can

you consult us? I thought at first I was going to be freelancing on the side, and then quickly realized these were way bigger projects. I also realized all this work I've done over the last three and a half years of building the community, understanding the industry, telling the story of it, growing awareness and momentum of it, sit perfectly to have a consulting firm. FemHealth Insights is a boutique consulting firm specializing in women's health innovation.

We help large companies on their women's health strategy, whether they're starting one, doubling down or diversifying it. One of the unique things we have is access to early femtech start-ups, so we really specialize. We are finding a lot of our requests right now are for acquisitions and investment into early-stage femtech companies, so that's really great for founders. I cannot wait until I help my first M&A. It's going to be amazing. I'll be potentially as happy as that founder is, because at the end of the day my goal is to improve women's health through innovation and technology.

Q Can you talk about the FemHealth Insights database that's being launched this summer?

A Barreto: We're building essentially the femtech version of PitchBook, or a forensic version of CrunchBase. It's an online software. Companies can buy an annual license, and they will get access to our insights and database of over 1,500 femtech start-ups in the world. We are constantly updating it. We have analysts that are moderating the Internet, looking at events, going to pitch competitions, finding companies at the earliest stage, still potentially in academia. We record things like funding rounds, grants, major milestones that are important to the company and FDA approval or clinical trials. Companies that want to acquire early-stage start-ups want to make sure that these start-ups have done their due diligence of proving that their product is safe and effective. We monitor things like that. We have a hierarchy of tagging with drop-down filters where you can filter for verticals such as menopause, menstruation, breast health, uterine health, bone health, brain health, heart health, all of these categories. I think we have about 111 conditions that we're tracking.

Q Who are your customers for the database?

A Barreto: Usually business development or corporate investors from large companies, so we're getting a lot of interest from pharmaceutical companies and medtech companies who are either trying to create a new solution or advance what they're currently offering. One thing we get a lot of is companies coming to us saying, 'We made this menopause solution and women aren't buying it.' Okay, well, let me see your marketing material. And it's all like little old women and that's where we come in and say, 'Did you know women do not know they're menopausal until at least three years on average into perimenopause?' 'If your product says this is a menopause solution, you're missing three years' worth of a consumer.'

Q What are some of the growth drivers in the femtech industry?

A Barreto: I think in the last decade there's been over 700% growth in start-ups being founded in femtech. There are four main drivers – women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), women in finance, women in the workforce, and decreased stigma. What we find is women researchers, engineers or in medicine predominantly gravitate towards creating solutions for females. We see women getting master's degrees or doctorate degrees. Over 80% of our founders are female. Why is that? Women in STEM are creating solutions for women.

We have women in finance. Investing is, I always say, one part logic, one part emotion. If you're only pitching to male investors about solutions, like some kind of breastfeeding pump, usually men don't understand the full struggle of the breastfeeding journey. When you're pitching this problem to these male investors, they're looking for the numbers, right? That's the logic part, the business model, the market size, the value, profit margins.

But then there's also the emotional part. You have to be really excited about a deal. When you're going to male investors trying to solve heavy menstrual bleeding, they don't feel very inclined to jump up and say, 'This is revolutionary!' Women in finance is a really critical point, especially when you're at the early stage and you don't have the data, you don't have the profit margins, you just have an idea. You need someone who believes in it. The third is women in the workforce. Forty-six percent of the

workforce in the US is female and women's health is affecting company's bottom line when half of your workforce is not feeling well. When they're getting breast cancer, when they're missing three days a month of work because they have endometriosis, when they have chronic migraines, that is affecting their bottom line. There are now health benefit programs that employers are starting to really buff up on their female-specific solutions for their female employees. And then, last but not least, is the decreased stigma.

If you look at #PCOS or #endometriosis on TikTok, there are literally billions of views, and when women see that one in 10 women have endometriosis, they all of sudden feel a little less lonely and isolated.

Q What are some of the biggest unmet clinical needs and opportunities you identified in your 2023 FemTech Landscape Industry Report?

A Barreto: Two of the biggest verticals that we found in need of innovation is menopause and mental health. Not every woman will be pregnant, but every woman will go through menopause if she lives long enough. (Also see "[Hot Flash! Menopause May Not Be Sexy, But Investors Are Warming To Digital Health Solutions](#)" - Medtech Insight, 3 Jun, 2022.)

In perimenopause, there are over 34 symptoms affecting women, ranging from hot flashes, brain fog, mood swings, irritability, vaginal dryness, weight gain. All of that has to do with the fluctuating hormones. And then post-menopause, you're dealing with very low estrogen and all the effects that come from that. Women were historically told you just need to ride it out. So there's this tremendous need to find solutions to help these women. (Also see "['Femtech' Evolving Beyond Periods, Pregnancy And Postpartum: What's Next In \\$1.2Tr Women's Health](#)" - Medtech Insight, 24 Feb, 2022.)

One of the biggest opportunities in medtech is diagnostics for women. So often we're relying on physicians believing female patients as they describe their symptoms. There is a real problem of medical gaslighting phenomenon right now, which is the

doctor saying, ‘Well, that sounds normal for your age. You’re menstruating, of course you have cramps or headaches, just take an Advil; or you have low sexual desire, take a vacation, maybe you’re just stressed.’ That is not only insulting to female patients, but it’s unhelpful. Women will have to go years without a diagnostic that shows they actually have a sexual dysfunction and should take this medication or have chronic migraines and that’s because of your hormones. Instead, I say to the medtech world, please find a diagnostic test for these things.

Two of my favorite companies right now are Hera Biotech and Molli Surgical. Hera Biotech is developing a diagnostic for endometriosis and entering clinical trials. Another medtech innovation that would be interesting for your readers and listeners is a company called Molli Surgical. Women that are suspected of having a lump in their breast and need biopsy are asked to go to the hospital very early in the morning and get the radiologists to identify where the lump is in the breast. They stick this metal string into her breast, so that the surgeon can easily find the lump. After they get the wire inserted, the women have to stay at the hospital all day with this wire hanging out of their breasts. Molli Surgical developed a little magnetic bullet that’s punched into the center of the lump that allows women to go home and can have it for three days, so highly innovative, highly technical. These are billion-dollar opportunities.

Q Let’s get personal. Can you talk about your upbringing and the people that made a difference in your life?

A Barreto: I was born and raised in New Jersey and actually hated science. In eighth grade, we had geology and I hated it. I literally remember 12-year-old Brit telling my mom, ‘I hate science.’ Turns out what I hate is rocks, because the next year we learned about cellular biology, mitochondria, and the nucleus, DNA, and I was like, ‘Oh my God, this is awesome.’ I’d like to give a shoutout to the Rotary Club. In high school, I was admittedly in a really bad situation. The Rotary Club came to my high school and told students about this foreign exchange program [paid for by the Club] and I was being able to live with a host family in France for a year. I learned French, made lifelong friends and I’ll be forever very grateful to the Rotary Club for that

experience.

Then at Drew University [undergraduate college], there was a woman named Carla who worked in the student center. I applied and got a very large scholarship, which really was the only reason I was able to go to Drew. I still owe six figures in student debt and can't even fathom what my student debt would be like without that scholarship.

Dr. Jack Gill, he's an angel investor, he wrote my first ever check. He put me in front of really wealthy active investors, and he said, 'This kid has the chops, you know, and he got some people to invest who never met me.' So often I got mentors, sponsors, people who reached out to me simply because I was just shining my light, unintentionally, just the way I do. But people see it and they latch on to that. For FemHealth Insights, I hope that one day we're so successful that we are setting up STEM scholarships for girls to go to summer camps if their families can't afford it, or college scholarships for STEM, or early-stage grants for start-up ideas in women's health. I'm really excited to give back.

Q Where do you live now and what do you like to do outside of work?

A Barreto: I made a pandemic move, as many of us did, looking for something a little bit more in nature. So Raleigh, North Carolina – great city, great town. I have a lot of pets. I love animals. Three dogs, three cats, a guinea pig and a turtle. My one dog's name is Trypsin like the enzyme, my other dog's name is Quark, it means the smallest particle known, he's a Chihuahua. My guinea pig, he's black with a little white on his chest. His name is Ginsburg like RBG. I'm really big into puzzling and just being outside.