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(part 1 of a 3-part series)



Tender, loving care

Fertility specialists have an arsenal of treatments for couples wanting children

Scott and Lisa Brody had been trying to conceive a child for three years without success. They had been to a fertility clinic and found Lisa had blocked fallopian tubes and some other health problems. They addressed those issues and kept on trying, but still to no avail.

"We were extremely desperate," Lisa said.

"We both come from big families and we each have four siblings. All the siblings have children and we were the

only ones who did not. You get to a point where being the favorite aunt and uncle is great... but being the favorite mom and dad would be wonderful."

Lisa, who was 30 at the time, began the in vitro fertilization (IVF) process. Three months later, the good news came.

"He told me he wanted to make sure he called me because he wanted to share in the good news."

Tyler, the Monee couple's first child, is now 4. But David and Lisa didn't stop at one child. They went through the in

vitro process again a few years ago and conceived a second child, Nathan, who is now 16 months old.

"If someone is thinking of doing this, they should give it a shot and not let the procedure scare them," Lisa said. "It's emotional and physical — there's a lot of shots, and testing that has to be done, but the outcome is the best."

An estimated one in seven couples will have trouble conceiving a child. The fact is, more couples are waiting until later in life to have children. Yet age

B Y T R A C Y A H R E N S

brings a natural decrease in the ability to conceive.

Tensions build until lucky couples find their release in a successful conception.

The good news is, current medical technology continues to improve the chances. More couples are able to conceive children through assisted reproductive technologies (i.e., infertility treatments). And expert reproductive endocrinologist practicing in the Chicago Southland are helping thousands of women each year to conceive children.

Infertility is classified as a disease of the reproductive system, in either a male or a female, which inhibits the ability to conceive and deliver a child. There are many factors involved. In nearly 30 percent of cases, the cause is attributed to the female, in 30 percent the cause is attributed to the male, in 30 percent the cause is attributed to both and in 10 percent of cases the cause is unknown.

Medical experts say nearly 90 percent of infertility cases are treatable with medical therapies such as drug treatments, surgical repair of reproductive

organs and assisted reproductive techniques such as in vitro.

"There have been many infertility treatments available for the last 30 years (such as artificial insemination). Those treatments are still available and still helpful," said Dr. John Murphy, reproductive endocrinologist and partner with Advanced Reproductive Health Centers/ Chicago IVF. Older methods today are combined with more high-tech procedures for men and women. As a result, the majority of couples who complete these treatments succeed in having a child.

"The subject of infertility used to be thought of as only 'God's will' for you to have a child or not, but now there are options," Murphy said. "The sooner couples see a reproductive endocrinologist, the better."

The passing of the Illinois Family Building Act in 1991 also gave couples more hope for conceiving children. The IFBA mandates insurance coverage for multiple cycles of treatment, including IVF procedures. There are only 18 states with mandatory coverage like this.

A cycle of fertility medications can run from \$2,000 to \$4,000 and IVF treatments from \$8,000 to \$12,000. Most couples do not conceive on the first try.

Reproductive endocrinologists agree, couples who want to conceive should not waste time. Age decreases fertility significantly. As a woman matures, her embryos also begin to become more genetically abnormal.

"I'm not suggesting couples change their lifestyles now. I think it is great that women are able to pursue careers early in life, but we have to be aware, while many women do well at conceiving a child at age 35, they aren't as successful. There is a risk and benefit to everything in life. There is also a risk and benefit to delaying childbearing."

Statistically, a healthy 30-year-old woman has about a 20 percent chance of naturally getting pregnant each month, whereas a 40-year-old woman's chances drop to about five percent each month.

"The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has been trying to educate women about reduced fertility



Photo courtesy of Serono, Inc.

Scientific research continues to improve medicines for treating infertility. Shown is a lab at Massachusetts-based Serono, Inc.

“There are many more new techniques on the horizon regarding infertility treatment. Who knows where they will take us.”

– Dr. John Murphy
Advanced Reproductive
Health Centers/Chicago IVF



Parents Scott and Lisa Brody of Monee turned to in vitro fertilization to conceive their children Tyler, 4, and Nathan, 16 months.

as they get older. I see patients of all ages. A good percentage of them are women and men in their late 30s and early 40s. Some of them already have younger children; they had children, took a break and came back to try again later in life.”

Though a woman’s fertility decreases with age, especially after the age of 35, 20 percent of women in the United States have their first child after this age.

There is a guideline most infertility specialists tell their patients when they are trying to conceive:

- After a year of trying to conceive naturally, about 85 percent to 90 percent of couples will conceive. If you are younger and have tried for one year to conceive without success you should see a reproductive endocrinologist.

- If you are a woman over age 35 and cannot conceive after six months of trying, you should see a reproductive endocrinologist immediately.

“It is extremely important that I tell my patients these statistics so they can have reasonable expectations. Although specialists can help a woman get pregnant, some women do not end up delivering. Miscarriage rates increase substantially as women age. Usually 30 to 40 percent of women have a chance of delivering. For women who are older (age 40 and over) and using their own eggs to conceive, the probability of them delivering drops dramatically.”

“Many couples who face infertility see their family doctor or general OB/GYN first. Most of them go through basic treatments and get discouraged. Couples should see a fertility specialist first... The goal of infertility treatments is to improve their chances.”

In terms of achieving pregnancy, most infertility specialists will recommend couples try simple steps first.

One option is an oral medication (clomiphene citrate), sometimes used in tandem with artificial insemination. In using this method of treatment, 92 percent of the pregnancies involve one child while eight percent turn out having twins.

A second option uses an injected drug to stimulate the pituitary gland to induce ovulation. This stimulates both ovaries to produce multiple eggs. Coupled with intrauterine insemination, the woman has a 15 percent chance to conceive per cycle.

A third option is using in vitro fertilization (IVF). For IVF, a woman is first prescribed fertility drugs to stimulate multiple egg production in her ovaries. Once she is ready, she visits her fertility clinic where an infertility specialist removes an average of 12 to 15 eggs. From there, the eggs are joined with the sperm in a laboratory. The successfully fertilized eggs are then either reinserted or frozen (for use later). The process is no more painful than a pap smear.

An exciting area of interest is freezing of oocytes (eggs). Many women who are of reproductive age but facing potential medical therapies for cancer or other life-threatening diseases (which may destroy ovarian production) would

like to save their eggs until later in life.

Prior to 2002, the success rate of live births from frozen eggs was 1 percent to 3 percent globally, with few babies born from frozen eggs over decades of attempts. But now cryoprotectants are used to reduce the amount of water that crystallizes within the cell and protect the cell during the freezing process.

On the male side of the equation, there are hopeful therapies as well.

The age of the male partner does not appear to matter nearly as much as the age of a female partner when it comes to fertility issues.

If a man has infertility issues, there are techniques for retrieving quality sperm. Two procedures — testicular sperm extraction (TESE) and microsurgical epididymal sperm aspiration (MESA) — rely on surgery to find and extract sperm from the male. In turn, the sperm is saved (often frozen) for future use in IVF procedures.

Protect your
fertility

One technique, with the acronym ICSI, involves microsurgery to inject a single sperm directly into an egg via a very fine glass needle. The surgery has revolutionized the treatment of severe and otherwise untreatable male factor infertility.

“There are many more new techniques on the horizon regarding infertility treatment,” Murphy said. “Who knows where they will take us.”

While there is nothing natural about infertility treatments, having a baby is 100 percent natural.

The Brodys, meanwhile, have not ruled out going through the process for a third time.

“We’re still thinking about it,” Lisa said. ■