

TEST OF TIME

IVF and surrogacy are no longer exotic options for parenthood. A confident generation has

Shalija Kaur has everything going for her; she is a citizen of the world, with a fine education, a successful Lebanese businessman husband, has a beautiful home and a corner office in one of Singapore's busiest trading districts. She is at the top of her game and nothing can blemish this carefully constructed world, not in the least the 38-year-old's desire for a child. Lately, she's been ruminating that her 'list of things to do' would be incomplete without that. So she makes a trip to Mumbai, now a well-known hub for In-Vitro-Fertilization with immense possibilities for surrogacy as well, to claim the latter as her choice of motherhood. On their recent trip the couple was keen to explore surrogacy to avoid pregnancy, delivery and maternity care which they thought they could 'outsource' to some one else. And at the same time achieve parenthood!

Purists may wince at this oddity, but for Dr Ameet Patki, Medical Director, ReGenesis — Centre for Assisted Reproduction, Endoscopy and Foetal Medicine, Reliance Life Sciences, Mumbai, and his team of doctors, it's just another day at work. They patiently hear them out, to eventually turn them over to one of the counselors at the centre. They urge them to change their mind, emphasising that the reasons for surrogacy had little to do with any medical emergency, and therefore not valid. The couple has returned home and the doctors have not heard from them since. Perhaps they are considering other options today.

After spending four years training and working in the field of reproductive health and infertility in London, when Dr Patki decided to return to India back in 1997, his bosses laughed out aloud and magnanimously told him that they would hold his job for a year, sure that he would return. "At the time I was unsure about the direction of my life, driven only by the traditional need to return home and settle down after a stint abroad," reminisces Dr Patki. A decade down the line — post liberalisation, with the number of working women scaling up, the splintering of the family system, and urban India itself becoming a new world order — he has made

good of his education and is one of the busiest infertility experts in the country. Meanwhile, in another part of the world — Patna — Abha (39) and Narendra Singh (45) are in their private quarters on the second floor of their two-storeyed house. Abha, a graduate in psychology from Sasaram College, spends her time away from the larger joint family downstairs in her own room, bent over sewing and occasionally water-colour canvases. A hausfrau, she took teaching in a school near her house, only to express motherly love by proxy. The couple has been married for 15 years and childless, a cause for much heart-burn given the stigma associated with childlessness in some parts of the country. A battery of tests was performed on her locally but nothing came of these efforts.

Infertility

Infertility occurs due to both male and female factors. In fact the incidence of male infertility is on the rise. This is due to better awareness and more acceptance by men to treatments, infertility can be due to medical and occasionally social reasons. Peer pressures, family demands and the Indian culture which demands that the family legacy needs to be continued add to the stress related to infertility. Even though things may have changed in metros, in small towns and villages infertility is associated with social ostracisation and considered ill luck.

Then, her sister urged Abha to seek medical help in Mumbai; IVF, she was told, could be their last ray of hope.

Tests done in 2007 in Mumbai showed that she had endometriotic cysts, but despite this IVF was performed on her by a renowned specialist in the city. Abha could not carry the baby to term, whereupon it was medically declared that she had barely four per cent chances of becoming a mother. Not willing to lose hope, in December last year the cysts were eliminated through laparoscopic surgery by another specialist, and the couple decided to take their chances at pregnancy again. It was successful and the couple has decided that they will return 'only with the baby'. Narendra, a civil engineer, with the state government, has taken a long leave of absence to be with his wife through their pregnancy. They have taken up a one-room flat next to Siddhivinayak temple, and intermittently members from the family will visit Abha till the child is born.

Excessive medication over the years has worn her down and Abha says that she is carrying the child through sheer willpower. Three months pregnant, she cannot stand or sit for long; she takes small walks around the neighbourhood and when tired, stretches out on the iron bed, the only piece of furniture in this makeshift transit home. "I was a student of psychology; I know to work through issues in my mind. We have faced social pressures for years, but I have held overwhelming love trapped inside me which



Dr Ameet Patki

can be expressed only to a child," says Abha. "Ab humlog lawaris nahin rahenge."

LIFE AROUND A PETRI DISH

IVF, surrogacy and freezing eggs are not exotic medical terms anymore. Just as polycystic ovaries, endometriosis, fibroids and genital TB are rampant among women. On the other hand there is a sharp rise in cases of infertility among men in urban India. These and other lifestyle issues are making couples rush to infertility experts to procreate. There has been a 100 per cent increase in the number of IVFs in the last two years and at least 20 per cent increase in fibroids and endometriosis among infertile couples. 50 per cent medical problems are seen to be with men. Dr Patki, who is treating Abha,

observes that apart from medical reasons, there is an increase in the proportion of patients who do not have time for sex, driven by the demands of urban living and their hectic profession lives. All this takes a toll on their stress levels which leads to decreased interest in sex. Take for instance this couple: the lady works in a call centre and her husband is out-of-town for long durations. They do not have time for sex. So the couple has made note of the period of ovulation, when he dashes back home. Traditionally, on most of these designated days the wife is bleached out after a long day at work and sex is the last thing on her mind. The petri dish seems to be their only option.

"Women's biological lives have taken a heavy beating since they have become part of the male work force. She is the central fig-

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found their manifold uses for making babies, observes Sudipta Basu



Dr Neeta Warty

ure at home and at work, has an image to cater to and is in the race to accumulate the best of everything. There is a price to pay," says Dr Neeta Warty, gynecological endoscopic surgeon. She explains that the emotional centre is very close to the hormone triggers in the brain. The ovary responds to the slightest upheavals here. Combined with this, with the child bearing age of the woman going up, the uterus gets uninterrupted estrogen exposure, resulting in an increase in the incidents of irregular menstrual cycles, fibroids and endometriosis, and also the general immune system getting directly affected by this.

VANITY FAIR

And then, sometimes vanity takes an upper hand. Dr Firuza Parikh, Director of Department of Assisted Reproduction (also responsible for the first ICSI baby in Southeast Asia), Jaslok Hospital, recounts the case of a 38-year-old lady, a mother of two, who driven by the

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they desire to be. At what other time could a 33-year-old single woman, owner of a successful design studio, offer to have a baby through artificial insemination. "The lady came to me with amazing clarity. She had not found anyone to wed, and had made up her mind that she was not keen to lose out on the experience of childbirth and motherhood either," says Dr Parikh. "Of course, it's all under wraps. But 10 years down the line she may well have made clean breast of her decision."

KNOW-HOW

Given the easy availability of medical literature, Dr Patki is often amused at the earnestness of couples for an IVF. Seventy per cent of the patients who come to him, he notes, do not need the procedure. "We must understand that a pregnancy may not occur due to non-medical reasons such as lack of intimacy. The latter can be resolved by counselling and use of options like follicle tracking and indicating to the couple the fertile period or IUI (Intra Uterine Insemination) where the husband's semen is washed and concentrated into a small volume containing the best sperm and depositing it into the womb of the woman," he says.

Rajee and Nandita Mehra have a one-month-old daughter. She teaches in a school, while he works

as a team developer in an international corporation, working late evenings through nights. After 13 years of marriage, Rajee says that they needed "to complete the family picture frame". Adoption was not an option and the couple spent many hours on YouTube to educate themselves on IVF, such that when they went to Dr Patki they were bubbling with information and sure of ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection), a method of fertilisation where a single sperm is used to inject the egg, as opposed to IVF. After much persuasion, IVF was deemed fit for the couple.

"Most couples do not realise the problems. Sometimes when you advise them on the fertile period, stress levels in the already stressed-out couple are known to shoot up. I have had husbands coming back with erectile dysfunctions and decrease in inter personal relations due to lack or non performance on these so-called best days," says Dr Patki.

Science has set wings to imagination. While it has created a support for the truly needy, it has also set people free and offered an option to be come what

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NEO-INTIMACY

The new order is also bringing forward a new behavioural pattern between the sexes. When Dr Parikh walks into Jaslok at 8 am every day, she finds husbands seated patiently with their wives waiting their turns; a marked shift from the days when men were not known to participate in pregnancy beyond the bare necessity. Could guilt be the reason for the turnaround? Guilt — driven by knowledge that the deficiency (infertility/low sperm count) rests in the men. Dr Parikh feels that while that may have been the reason some years ago, men are increasingly becoming comfortable with the shortcoming and are ready to seek medical help. "They are completely involved in the process," she says. "There is a US-based couple in their early thirties who has been going through IVF. The husband wanted to know when the embryo would be implanted in his wife's womb. He wanted to be there, as he felt the experience would be akin to having sex."

In a traditional society such as India, despite the cosmetic changes liberalisation might have

IVF and ICSI

IVF (In vitro fertilisation and embryo transfer) is the process where the ovaries are stimulated with medicines, typically injections to create multiple eggs. These are then extracted out of the body with ultrasound guidance. Then in the laboratory the eggs are fertilised with the sperm. In the conventional technique the eggs and sperm are mixed in a petri dish to allow the sperm to fertilise the eggs naturally.

These petri dishes contain culture media which contains all the nutrients that the gametes would need to survive. The dishes are kept in the incubators which mimic body temperature, oxygen and CO2 concentrations. The resultant embryos are observed for a couple of days to ensure that they are growing well and then transferred into the woman's womb where it implants the pregnancy would grow.

Now-a-days with the availability of the micromanipulator, it is possible to inject a single sperm into an egg. This procedure is called as ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection). This helps couples where the sperm concentration or motility is very low and the conventional IVF would fail.

caked on, the national psyche vis-à-vis parenthood remains unchanged.

You need to have a child, the child often ought to be yours. The more things change, the more things stay the same. This is precisely when your eggs needn't be on walkie; they could be shipped to a laboratory of your choice instead. We all, after all, have the right to be mirrored.



ABHA AND NARENDRA SINGH ARE READY TO BECOME PROUD PARENTS AFTER 15 YEARS, THANKS TO IVF



Dr Firuza Parikh

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