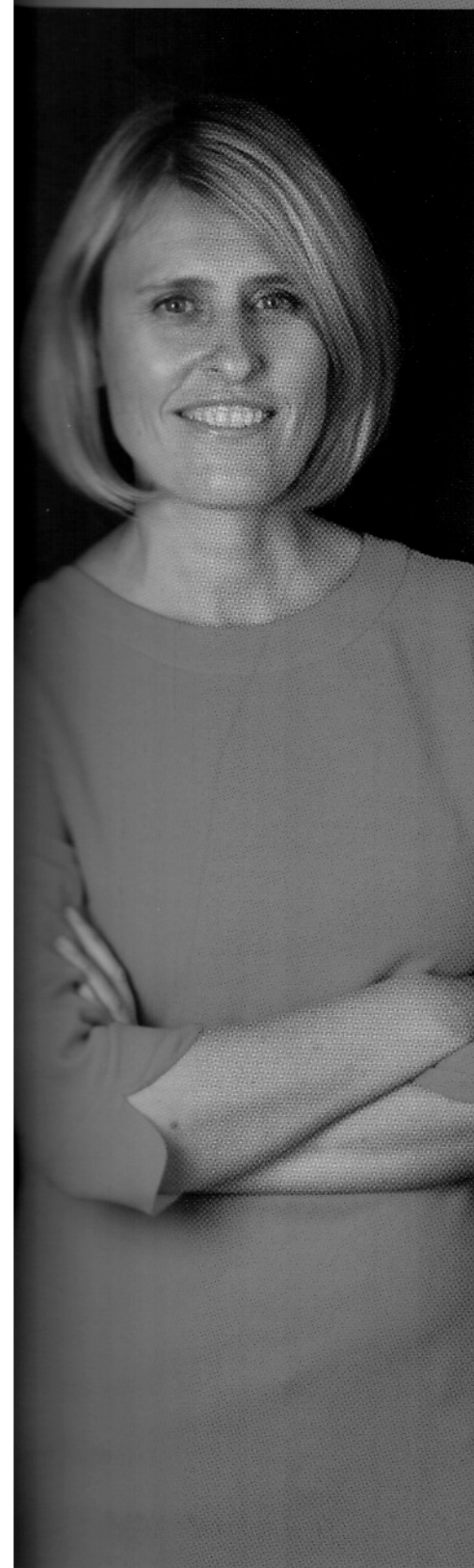


FROM A PATIENT PERSPECTIVE

A COLUMN BY JESSICA HEPBURN, AUTHOR OF THE PURSUIT OF MOTHERHOOD
THIS MONTH: NATURAL IVF



'Natural IVF': two words that, when placed together, make uneasy bedfellows. After all, when Dr Robert Edwards pioneered the process of in-vitro fertilisation in the 1970s, people considered it a wholly unnatural process. For many, Edwards represented a modern day Frankenstein who created babies in a test tube. But now, nearly 40 years and five million births later, it's clear that children born from IVF are no biologically different from those are conceived in the 'normal' way. In 2010, just before he died, Edwards was awarded the Nobel Prize, and the rest, as they say, is history.

But even though IVF is undoubtedly now an accepted medical miracle, I don't think there is any couple who would choose it over the regular way of making babies. It's certainly not how anybody imagines they will become parents. However, there is a growing group of medical professionals who believe that IVF can be administered in a more natural way. Moreover, they also believe it can lead to better results.

The basic premise of IVF has always been two-fold: to assist fertilisation of egg and sperm by doing it outside the body where you can make sure that everything is in the right place at the right time; and to increase the probability of success by enabling a woman to produce many more eggs than she would normally release in a single month through a course of ovary-stimulation drugs. No doubt some people reading this have been there, done it. In fact, for any woman who has had several rounds of IVF, egg numbers can become an obsession. For a long time whenever I woke up from an anaesthetic after egg collection, the first question I'd ask would be: 'How many eggs?'

However, in 'natural' or its sister treatment 'mild IVF' the aim is to use far fewer, if any, stimulation drugs. This inevitably means fewer eggs are produced but the theory is that this is better for your body by reducing the risk of ovarian

hyperstimulation, as well as other short- and long-term side-effects. Crucially, the pioneers of 'natural IVF' also believe that it can improve the quality of your embryos. And an added bonus is that the cost per cycle is considerably less.

I have undertaken one round of 'mild IVF' and the results were startling. I must point out though that this column is not about evangelising for a particular treatment because no-one has yet been able to deliver me my miracle baby. I do, however, want to give you something to think about.

What happened was this: on much less medication than I'd been given on previous IVF cycles, I actually produced nearly the same number of eggs. In other words - half the drugs, half the money, and almost the same percentage chance of success. In addition to this, in all our previous rounds of IVF we had been encouraged to use ICSI as it can optimise fertilisation rates (although it was primarily developed for men with sperm issues). This is a more expensive procedure which involves injecting sperm into the egg rather than letting them do the work themselves in a Petri dish (or aforementioned test tube).

But at this clinic which was pioneering more natural approaches, we were encouraged not to do ICSI but to try conventional IVF. Amazingly we had a 100 per cent fertilisation rate, the highest we'd ever achieved, which offered an indication that we'd never needed ICSI in the first place.

The moral of this story, for me, is that sometimes clinics give us treatment protocols and drugs that we don't actually need. I'm not saying that they are necessarily doing this for their financial gain - I'm sure all fertility clinics and their doctors want us to be successful (at the very least it improves their statistics). But, perhaps, a more natural (and cheaper) approach is worth trying first before embarking on a world of high level drugs and intervention.

I would now strongly encourage couples to explore whether 'natural' or 'mild IVF' might be right for them. After all natural selection does make sense - that's how it works normally!

Jessica's website: www.thepursuitofmotherhood.com