

# FROM A PATIENT PERSPECTIVE

A COLUMN BY JESSICA HEPBURN, AUTHOR OF THE PURSUIT OF MOTHERHOOD  
THIS MONTH: SWIMMING FOR NEW LIFE

Over the last year I've been asked a lot of questions. How far is it? Do you cover yourself with goose fat? Can you get out and have a rest? But the question I've been asked more than any is why on earth do you want to swim the English Channel? Fewer people have swum the 21 miles from England to France than have climbed Mount Everest and for someone who two years ago couldn't paddle more than a couple of lengths in the pool, and who hates exercise and the cold, it does seem a peculiar choice. But I wanted to do something big, something way beyond my comfort zone. I wanted to find another focus after a decade of fertility treatment and I wanted to fundraise for families without the children they long for, and children without the families they desperately deserve.

Although I quickly discovered that training to undertake one of the hardest physical and mental endurance feats on the planet is tough, what I wasn't prepared for was quite how many parallels there were going to be with going through IVF. There is so much about swimming the Channel that, like IVF, is out of your control – the weather, the tides and the power of the sea. However much training you do, nature has a huge part in deciding your fate and in terms of fertility, nature hasn't always been very kind to me. As the day of my swim drew closer, there seemed to be more and more at stake. I had so many people supporting and rooting for me and yet a growing, ever deepening fear that I'd have to tell everyone that I'd failed yet again.

But, on September 2, 2015, I set out at 1.30am from Dover swimming into the dark. At first everything seemed to be going well until I started to be sick – a combination of nerves, the fumes from my support boat and an adverse reaction to the liquid carbohydrate feeds. My support team were worried and didn't think I would make it, and in answer to one of those many questions, no you can't get out for a rest. By hour seven, I had stabilised but worse was yet to come – one of the many hazards of the Channel is jellyfish, and there were literally millions of them. They are particularly prevalent in the middle of the Channel and,

thankfully, by the time I reached French waters most of them had gone, but my slow progress had meant the tide had turned against me and it was going to be very difficult to land. I was swept down the coast and for five hours France looked tantalisingly close yet I couldn't reach it. My desperate mantra became 'It's not getting any closer' and my support team were doing everything they could to spur me on. I was getting cold, my shoulders slowly turning blue, and in answer to another of those questions: no, you're not allowed to wear a wetsuit and no amount of goose fat will keep you warm.

But finally, at around 7:20pm, 17 hours, 44 minutes and 30 seconds after I began, my feet touched the sand of Sangatte just west of Calais. It was an incredible experience, an ending both perfect and profound, a bit like giving birth when you finally get to hold your baby in your arms and it eclipses all the pain. And although a decade of fertility treatment hasn't yet resulted in the outcome I've always longed for, it has resulted in me swimming the Channel which has changed my life in unexpected and wonderful ways. I have also raised over £20,000 for the national charity Infertility Network UK and for children growing up in care.

Now the question people ask me is: would I recommend that they swim the Channel too? Contrary to what you might expect my answer is never an immediate 'yes'. I wouldn't say an immediate 'yes' to anyone struggling to conceive either if they asked me whether they should go through IVF. You've got to consider these things carefully and follow the path that is most right and true for you. But I do think that everyone should do something beyond their comfort zone, and I do think that the biggest challenges often have the greatest rewards. For many of us, having a baby is the biggest reward of all but, for me, swimming the Channel has also resulted in the birth of a new life, and that's a new life for me.

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