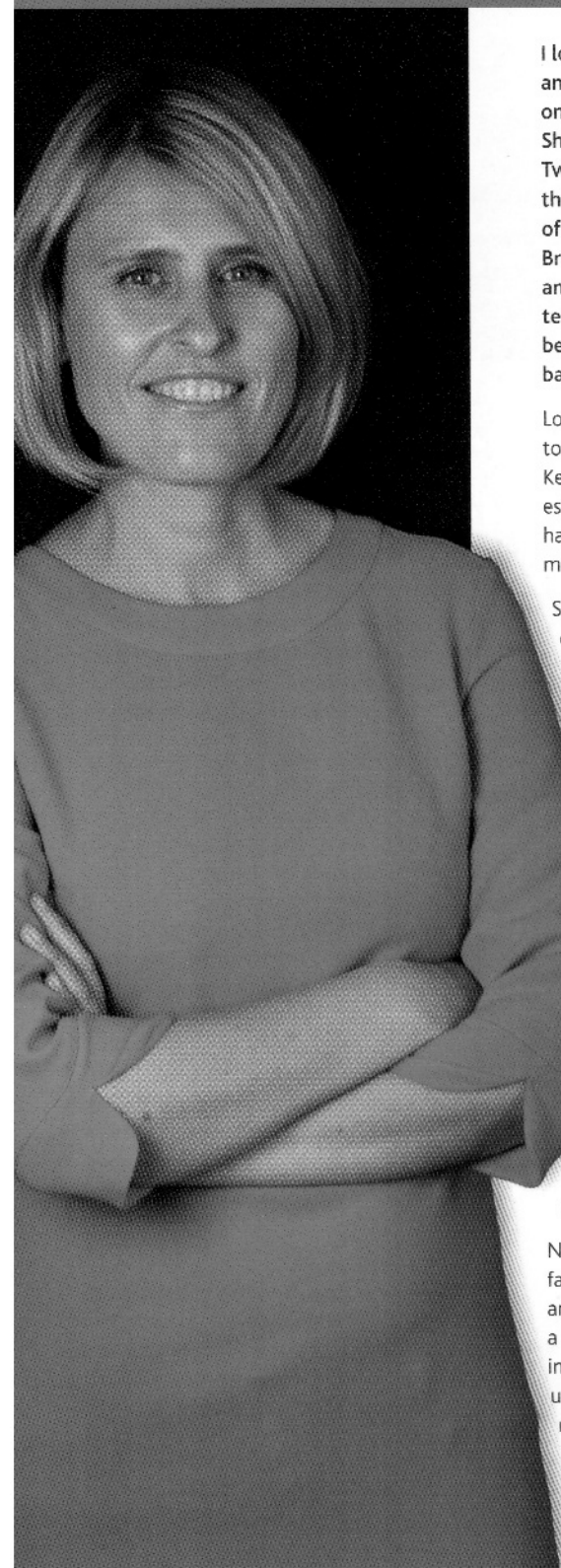


FROM A PATIENT PERSPECTIVE

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



I love it when I get a new follower on Twitter and last month I had an especially exciting one: Louise Brown, the world's first IVF baby. She's just published her autobiography and Twitter is, of course, a great way of telling the world about it. For the many thousands of us going through IVF each year, Louise Brown made it possible... well, Robert Edwards and Patrick Steptoe - who pioneered the technique of in-vitro fertilisation which became commonly known as the 'test tube baby' - did.

Louise was born in 1978, the year that Bee Gees topped the charts with Night Fever and Clark Kent met Lois Lane in Superman. Since then it's estimated that over five million test tube babies have been born, but she was the very first and marked the beginning of the IVF generation.

So given I am someone who has put her hopes of motherhood into test tube after test tube, you can see why I was so excited when Louise connected with me on Twitter.

Louise's birth did not come easily. Professor Edwards' research was initially so controversial that he had to work in secret using his own sperm in his experiments. And when it looked like his ultimate experiment had worked, a headline on the front cover of the *New York Times* heralded Louise's arrival into the world with the words 'Frankenstein Myth Becomes A Reality'. Following her birth media interest was so intense that journalists were camped outside the hospital and later the family home.

She was also invited to tour the world, clocking up nearly 30,000 air miles in her first year.

Not many people can say they are world famous from the moment they are born, and you have to wonder how all this felt for a little girl growing up. The combination of initial abhorrence that life could be created unnaturally followed by adoration when it was, must have been confusing.

It's to their credit that Louise's parents made the decision to take their daughter out of the limelight when she was a few years old

in order to try to give her a 'normal' upbringing. Nowadays she lives a 'normal' life in Bristol as a mum of two firmly away from the camera.

Louise recognises she made history for all the IVF babies that followed after her. She's the one name we remember but just one in millions who have now been born. What fascinates me though is not just how it is for her but also how it feels for them. As children we don't want to be different from our friends and when we are it shapes who we become. So how does it feel to be part of a minority conceived by science not just for children born through IVF but those who are the result of donor insemination and the new techniques that are now emerging like mitochondrial transfer, something that essentially means you have three biological parents not two. What autobiographies are yet to be written and what will they say?

One of the things that worries me is that for as long as fertility treatment remains a taboo subject, little discussed or understood, it's going to have an inevitable psychological effect on the children who are born as a result. There is still so much shame felt by individuals going through it and I am regularly contacted by people who thank me for being brave enough to speak out about the sense of inadequacy and desperation that infertility and the pursuit of motherhood can bring. This is one of the reasons why I really welcome the fact that IVF has recently been included as a subject on the school curriculum. We need to normalise assisted conception and alternative routes to parenthood so that children born as a result don't feel ostracised from their peers.

When Louise Brown was born her doctors suggested that her middle name should be 'Joy'. There is no better word to describe the emotion that any couple struggling with fertility feels when they get a positive pregnancy test, or hold their longed-for baby for the first time. But it's so important we don't forget how IVF babies were made and the impact this might have. This miraculous but imperfect science is here to stay and the more we acknowledge, accept and appreciate it the better it will be for all of us.

thepursuitofmotherhood.com