

## The birth of tomorrow's world

One in six couples in Canada have trouble conceiving, but there's hope

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After five years of trying to have a baby, "an emotional roller-coaster" through waiting rooms, tests, more tests, and several cycles of in vitro fertilization, Glenna Owen finally became a mother at the age of 41.

Her and husband John are now the proud parents of two girls, Elizabeth, 4, and Claire, 2, both who were conceived through IVF, a process where fertilization of the egg is done in a lab, and the embryo is transferred into the uterus to continue its development.



CREDIT: Submitted

Glenna Owen is the mother of Elizabeth, 4, and Claire, 2, who were both conceived through in-vitro fertilization.

"Claire, our second, was a frozen embryo. So they're both from the same batch," she says. "They were both conceived in 2007 and Elizabeth was part of our fresh cycle and a year and four months later when we went to try for No. 2, Claire was the frozen embryo.

"So Claire was frozen as an eight-cell embryo and when she thawed out she became five cells, and now she's a gazillion cells," she laughs. "So in a weird way they're fraternal twins, just born 25 months apart."

As much as this may sound like a scene from the future, fertility experts say assisted reproduction is not only more common today but it will continue to be more accessible as new choices become available with advancing technology.

Infertility has nearly doubled since 1992 and one in six couples in Canada now have



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Lisa Steckler, who was diagnosed with PCOS last year, says the holistic approach of acupuncture and Chinese herbal tea helped her to conceive naturally.

trouble conceiving, according to the Genesis Fertility Centre in Vancouver, a clinic with the largest IVF program in B.C. and one of the most successful fertility rates in Canada.

Infertility can be an emotionally, psychologically and financially devastating diagnosis. A single IVF cycle costs \$8,000 to \$10,000 and in B.C., the Medical Services Plan currently does not cover fertility treatments or drugs.

Our changing society is playing a significant role in the rise of infertile couples, defined as one year of trying to have a baby without success, says Dr. Jason Hitkari of Genesis.

"I think it's really that people are waiting longer to have their families. And we talk mostly about women's age but we are learning more about men and aging and reproduction," says Hitkari. "I think a lot of people are fooled by seeing celebrities having children in their 40s and they don't realize that's often done with treatments such as egg donation."

It's really important for people to know that as they get to their late 30s or early 40s that trying to get pregnant can be a real challenge."

Ten years ago, when Owen was ready to start a family at age 36, her and husband, then 48, thought it wouldn't be a big deal. After trying for six months without success, the couple went to see their family doc-tor.

Unknowingly, as if falling down the rabbit hole, their fertility journey would be riddled with new problems and unexpected turns.

The couple decided on IVF after medical tests determined that his sperm had poor motility. During her first IVF cycle, she was converted to a different treatment when doctors found she was unresponsive to fertility drugs. Either way, it didn't work.

Around that time, Owen had read about acupuncture and how it can improve fertility. She found her way to Accubalance Wellness Centre where she met Dr. Lorne Brown, the clinical director of the centre.

A doctor in traditional Chinese medicine, Brown offers patients techniques, support and information to reach an optimal state of health so couples will have their best possible chance to conceive, he says.



CREDIT: Submitted

Dr. Lorne Brown, a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine and clinical director of Accubalance Wellness Centre, says diet and lifestyle greatly affect fertility.



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Dr. Jason Hitkari of Genesis Fertility Centre supports provincial funding for IVF treatments and says it would reduce the number of multiple births.

While Western medicine focuses on the absence of disease, Eastern philosophy of medicine strives for vitality, says Brown. He also says that our current lifestyle in the West is causing us to age prematurely at an accelerated rate.

He makes a distinction between chronological and biological age, and says the latter depends mostly on lifestyle and environmental factors.

"You can't look at all 40-year-olds and say they're equal. Chronologically, yes, they're all 40 but bio-logically, is that 40-year-old like a 50-year-old? Because 40-year-old women should be able to have babies." a 50-year-old? Because 40-year-old women should be able to have babies."

Poor diet, lack of exercise, insufficient sleep and chronic stress which are all characteristic of our society today, are affecting people's fertility, says Brown. "Our biological potential is to live to about 100-plus. So we're not living up to our biological potential. And that's because of our fast food, overly processed refined food, toxins in our environment, chemicals in our food and high sugar content."

He cites a groundbreaking study of fertility and diet from 2008 which tracked 18,000 women over eight years, the Harvard Nurses' Health Study, that found eating a slow carb (whole grain, vegetables, fruit and beans), whole food (in the state that mother nature created them), and mostly plant-based diet increased fertility by six-fold.

Brown believes in a simple analogy to help his patients conceive: "Nourish the soil before you plant the seed." But he also offers this: "If you're young and thinking of delaying children because of career, I say 'Don't,' if you can help it."

Taking the best of both worlds, the integrated approach seems to be working. Hitkari of Genesis says his patients often report improvements after starting acupuncture treatments. Brown says a combination of acupuncture and Chinese herbal therapy increases blood flow to the reproductive organs and balances the hormones in the body which he stresses is vital for conception.

"What acupuncture did and the TCM is that it regulated my cycle," says Owen. "And for my husband, when he was first tested, 98 per cent of his sperm had low motility and when we tested again a year and a half later, it was down to 30 per cent."

Some patients have even conceived naturally during this process of "readying" their bodies for pregnancy.

Lisa Steckler, 34, is one such patient who was diagnosed a year ago with polycystic ovarian syndrome, a condition that often causes irregular ovulation and monthly cycles. After several months of trying for a baby, her and husband Dylan, 38, decided to first try the holistic route. She started going to Accubalance twice a week for acupuncture and drank Chinese herbal tea morning and night.

"I started seeing less of a gap between cycles," she says. "I could just tell that things were moving much better through my body."

But last fall, after about seven months of acupuncture, Steckler had another late cycle. She says it sent her back to a place of deep-rooted doubt that she would

never become pregnant. "That's when we started looking at adoption, and feeling kind of desperate at that moment. "The amazing thing was that the weekend that I was looking at adoption on the Internet, I was already pregnant and I didn't know it."

Now seven months pregnant and looking back, a big part of the process, she says, was uncovering how much fear she was holding underneath, the feeling that her body was against her.

"There was a lot of support at Accu-balance to talk about those fears and to introduce a new pattern of belief. Dr. Brown totally believed in me, and really believed that we were seeing results. I think that was a really important element. To believe that it was possible."

## MISCONCEPTIONS

? Misconception No. 1: Infertility is a female problem. Fact: 40 per cent of the time it's due to the male factor, 40 per cent is due to female and 20 per cent is due to both.

? Misconception No. 2: I can wait until I'm 40 to conceive. Look at all the movie stars getting pregnant at 40. Fact: Despite all the stories you've heard, fertility declines at a much earlier age than you might think. A healthy woman's fertility peaks in her mid-20s and starts to decline at about age 27.

? Misconception No. 3: Weight doesn't impact my fertility. Fact: Being too thin or over-exercising can stop ovulation. On the other hand, being overweight can disrupt your hormones and help prevent conception.

? Misconception No. 4: Only a woman's biological clock is ticking. Fact: Recent studies indicate that men may start losing their fertility as early as 35. Over 45, a man may experience a decline in sperm quality, dropping testosterone levels and a diminished libido.

? Misconception No. 5: The day I ovulate is the best day to get pregnant. Fact: The best time to have intercourse is just before you ovulate. There's a slender 12-to-24 hour monthly window when an egg can be fertilized, usually around the middle of your menstrual cycle.

? Misconception No. 6: Infertility means we'll never have a child. Fact: Infertility does not mean sterility. With refined medical treatments, up to 90 per cent of infertile couples become pregnant. -Source: Genesis Fertility Centre

## FINDING FUNDS FOR IVF

Currently, Quebec is the only province in Canada where IVF is covered under the provincial health plan.

In a landmark decision to implement the program in August 2010, Quebec now funds three IVF cycles with a single embryo transfer policy.

The aim of the program is to reduce the number of multiple births, which bring higher risk than "singletons." Multiple babies are often born prematurely and need specialized care putting additional stress on the health care system.

According to the Canadian Assisted Reproductive Technologies Registry, early results from Quebec are promising, showing a decrease in twins from 27.2 per cent to 5.2 per cent in the first six months of government funding.

Without coverage, a single IVF cycle costs \$8,000 to \$10,000 so many couples opt for multiple embryos to be transferred at one time.

Some patients only have "one shot" when paying out of their own pockets, and their aim is to increase their chances for pregnancy.

The medical community is in favour of provincial IVF funding citing there are many benefits to regulating the number of embryo transfers. In addition, the World Health Organization has defined the right to have children as a basic human right and a health issue.

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