



Spontaneous pregnancies after failed IVF/ICSI

1 Introduction

Assisted reproductive technology (ART) is a burgeoning business. However it is supported by very little long-term research. One of many unanswered questions is that of spontaneous pregnancies in couples who have tried and failed in vitro fertilisation (IVF) or intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI).

2 The research

This study¹ looked at babies born to 200 Belgian couples for which IVF and/or ICSI had failed. Twenty-three singleton pregnancies were recorded, with a cumulative pregnancy rate of 12.5% after 36 months. The mean time from the end of the patients' treatment to the birth of a child was 20.2 months. Only the duration of infertility was associated with this time interval. Occurrence of spontaneous pregnancy decreased with increased duration of infertility.

Spontaneous pregnancies occurred in female patients with idiopathic (no known cause) infertility, endometriosis, and dysovulation, and none of these patients had undergone a female factor infertility treatment after discontinuing ICSI. Treatment-independent pregnancy was more likely to occur in couples with female factor infertility. It is noted that, for ethical reasons, paternity could not be confirmed.

According to the authors, this research shows that the duration of infertility can predict the likelihood of treatment-independent conception and delivery after discontinuing ICSI. It also supports the hypothesis that "such patients are characterized by hitherto unrevealed prognostic factors".

3 Ethical analysis

Much of the public accepts ART because it helps infertile people to have children. The fact that some couples in ART programs are not actually infertile should be of great public interest for several reasons. Most importantly, IVF and ICSI both involve great loss of human embryonic life. Furthermore couples endure great emotional stress during treatment. Particularly for the woman, the procedures are highly invasive. In addition, ART attracts public funding in some countries, so efficient use of resources is highly relevant.

It is great news that some couples who believed they were infertile have now had a child. But this research is also of great concern and should raise the important question of prognosis and the decision to attempt ART. Is infertility being incorrectly diagnosed in fertile couples? How often does this happen, and what are the implications? Is it possible that some pregnancies attributed to ART interventions are in fact spontaneous?

¹ Osmanagaoglu K. *et al* "Spontaneous pregnancies in couples who discontinued intracytoplasmic sperm injection treatment: a 5-year follow-up study" *Fertility & Sterility*, September 2002; 78(3):550-556



Deliberate inclusion of fertile couples in ART programs would be unethical (although such couples now sometimes seek ART in order to access PGD techniques). But relaxing criteria for a diagnosis of infertility could potentially increase client numbers and boost success rates. This is not a suggestion that ART practitioners are villains, but a reminder that the profit motive may unconsciously influence practice, and citizens therefore need to be vigilant about ART practices.