

Infertility, the Second Time Around

Treatment and Support in Westchester

By Jean Sheff

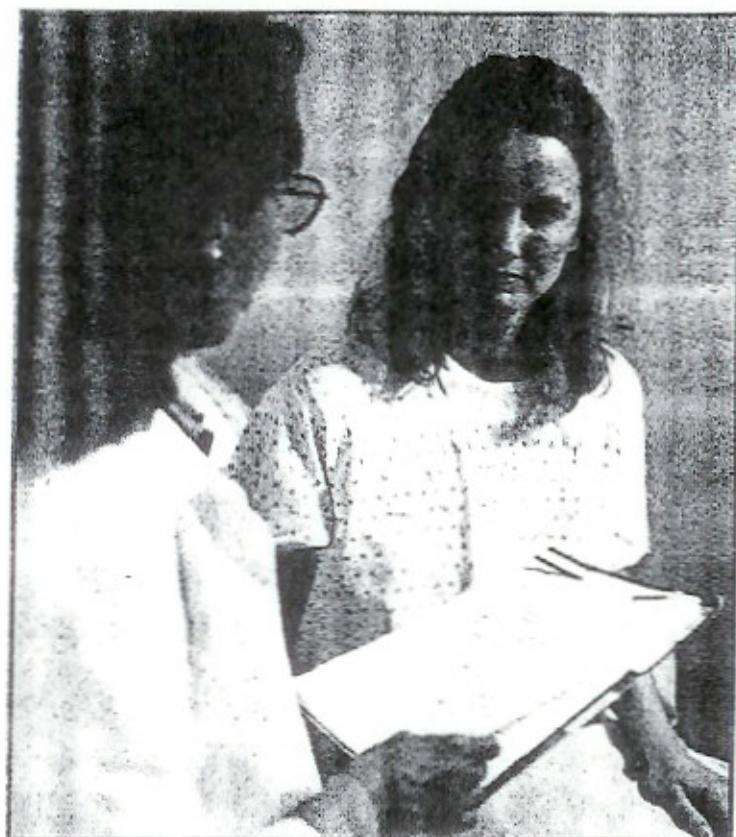
When Mamaroneck resident Jessica Adelman* and her husband decided to start a family, it happened quickly. "We were pregnant in about five minutes," says Adelman. Twenty-eight-years-old at the time, she had a brilliantly uneventful pregnancy that produced a beautiful baby boy. It was no preparation for the rude awakening that came two years later.

Adelman and her husband originally considered having five children, not many compared to her husband's eight siblings. Deciding to add to their family, Adelman conceived but then miscarried. After that, years of effort proved useless. "Secondary infertility was running my life," says Adelman. "I was broke — financially, emotionally and psychologically."

Not Alone

Adelman says that nothing anyone said made her feel better and medical assistance wasn't proving helpful either. Many cases of secondary infertility remain unexplained. She agreed to tell her story because she knows now that she is not alone and it was helpful eventually finding others who understood. "Secondary infertility is very hidden," says Adelman. "When you already have a child you feel you have no right to be sad about not having another. Shouldn't you just be grateful?"

So while friend after friend went on to their second and third preg-



nancies, Adelman spent hours in doctors' offices where women with primary infertility couldn't relate to her pain. "I felt very isolated," she says. Years later, she discovered that a woman she saw daily at her son's preschool had been going through the same ordeal, but neither of them knew of the other's situation to be supportive of one another. "I'd wish people would talk about this more, if they would reach out for help — maybe more help would become available."

Local Medical Treatment

Infertility experts define secondary infertility as the failure to become pregnant after a full year of trying to conceive when a previous pregnancy has resulted in a successful birth. According to statistics from the National Survey of Family Growth, once a woman has delivered a baby, her chances of not being able to conceive again are less than 10 percent. Overall, parenthood proves elusive for 15 percent of the population.

Many couples who suspect infertility scramble to New York City seeking the help of some of the top specialists in the field. Then others, like Adelman, discover that big city clinics just add to their stress. "I found the whole process to be stressful and demeaning," she says.

"They are enormous cash-only environments." If a couple is dealing with secondary infertility, having a toddler to care for further complicates the treatment commute.

A recent birthday party held at Montefiore's Hartsdale Infertility Institute celebrated the birth of local "miracle" babies born in the past year with the help of modern fertility medicine. The parents gathering on that day had faced enormous odds and won. "We thought about seeking treatment in the city," says Rebecca Rodriguez of Scarsdale. "But a local referral sent us here and we have our son, Simon, to show for it." It was the quality of the health care that convinced Sabita Brijmahar of Yonkers to seek care at the Institute. "I found the doctors here take the time to listen to me."

Montefiore's results with in vitro fertilization exceed the national average — helping nearly 50 percent of women 35 and younger to conceive as compared to some 27 percent for these patients nationwide. "We are very proud of our pregnancy rates," says Harry J. Lieman, M.D., medical director of Montefiore's Hartsdale Fertility Institute. "And even prouder of our transfer rate." Their laboratory has developed methods for reducing the number of embryos that must be transferred for successful impregnation. This reduces the number of multiple pregnancies and, therefore, increases the chances of stronger babies being born. "We have worked hard to perfect the process," he says.

Montefiore has announced that this year they will merge two existing interrelated facilities, the Hartsdale Fertility Institute and the Fertility and Hormone Center in Dobbs Ferry. The new center, Montefiore's Institute for Reproductive Medicine and Health at 141 South Central Ave. in

A Quick Look

Infertility, it's out in the open a lot more these days. But couples dealing with secondary infertility have been reluctant to come forward to seek treatment and support. Guess what? It's out there and available locally. Area professionals are eager to share their insights and offer help.

Hartsdale, will create a centralized facility featuring a state-of-the-art in vitro fertilization laboratory and a full range of advanced and conventional infertility services, the only one of its kind in Westchester.

Since primary and secondary infertility causes are subject to some of the same conditions, treatments are often identical and testing is the same across the board. John Stengal M.D., an infertility and reproductive endocrinologist in private practice in Rye, notes that one common cause of secondary infertility is pelvic scarring within the female reproductive tract. "Couples should be encouraged to seek treatment for secondary infertility," says Stengal. "Once they have produced a child there is more anticipation that we can assist and be helpful."

Stengal and Lieman agree that maternal age is a real issue. "To give you an idea, statistically, a 47-year-old woman has a 0.1 percent chance of getting pregnant," says Stengal. "We all feel healthier than the generation before us. We can run further, yet inside we are genetically programmed."

Lieman is inclined to offer more aggressive treatments to a woman of advanced age. "A younger woman can take more time to deal with infertility; advanced age reduces our chance of success so we may elect

to offer more aggressive treatments."

"There are no guarantees at any age," cautions Adelman, who was just 31 when her infertility problems began. "I know now not to take it for granted."

Emotional Support

Private practitioners in White Plains, Ann Crane, Psy.D., and Stewart Crane, ACSW, are co-chairs for the Westchester Chapter of RESOLVE, a local chapter of RESOLVE – the national nonprofit, education, advocacy and support network. The chapter offers free monthly educational sessions at the Scarsdale Library, coordinates local, professionally led support groups and provides information to the community.

Having dealt personally with infertility, the Cranes have the ability to truly understand its emotional impact. "Couples are concerned

how what they are going through will affect the child they have – financially, emotionally," says Ann Crane. "Then there is the daily stress,

marital tension and the fact that people are less likely to seek out support for secondary infertility," explains her husband, Stewart.

Primary and secondary scenarios provoke a sense of isolation and

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Five Ways to Cope With Infertility

Gail D. Crespy offers the following suggestions:

- Reduce the isolation that tends to accompany infertility. You can teach all but the least sensitive family and friends how they can best support you.
- Allow yourself to cry and be angry. Cutting yourself off from your emotions is counterproductive. Experiencing your emotions can provide you with relief and the energy you need to meet the demands of life.
- Allow your spouse to feel and cope differently than you.
- Improve your communication with your spouse.
- Use mind/body techniques to reduce distressing negative emotions and physical symptoms. Engage in a variety of activities that help to reduce stress, such as, yoga, tai chi, meditation or exercise.

Infertility

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powerlessness. "Infertility can wreak havoc on every aspect of a person's life," comments Ann Crane. Support groups help people with the isolation and offer many potential healing benefits. "Sometimes people feel afraid that if they talk about it they will feel worse, when the opposite is actually true," she adds.

Professionals agree that people experiencing secondary infertility deserve their own support group. The Westchester Chapter offers such a group but finds people are reluctant to use the help. "Couples often feel they don't have the right to take their pain seriously, but they do," says Stewart Crane. Individual counseling can also be beneficial.

Many medical professionals agree that emotional support is critical when dealing with infertility issues.

A Mind/Body Approach

Gayle D. Crespy, who holds a doctorate in psychology, is program director of the Behavior Management Infertility Program in Rye Brook and knows how won-

derful children can be because her one-and-a-half year-old daughter reminds her of it every day. She also knows that failing to produce a child can be devastating. "People become consumed by infertility, it's a horrific lifestyle," she says.

Crespy agrees that infertility is a medical problem. "It's a fallacy that depression or stress causes infertility," she explains. Yet, infertility can cause depression. Crespy believes treating depression is an important link in treating infertility.

"Depression may not cause infertility but it certainly doesn't help," she says. "A good reason for getting emotional support is, although we can not explain why, if you lower your depression you increase your likelihood of conceiving." Infertility can be so consuming that often people do not even realize they are depressed. Other negative emotions associated with infertility; isolation, anger, frustration and anxiety must also be addressed.

Crespy, who has trained at Harvard's Mind/Body Medical Institute for Women's Health at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical

Center in Boston, offers the 10-week comprehensive Harvard program, as well as mind/body support groups. Crespy reports that approximately 44 percent of the participants conceive within six months of completing the course. "The medical world says, 'I can get your body pregnant' and I believe there is a direct relationship between the mind and body," says Crespy. "I teach skills that can help you before, during and after procedures." These are tools for life.

Crespy's approach uses a combination of breathing techniques, visualizations, yoga, nutrition and cognitive restructuring to help normalize feelings. She also sees that couples going through secondary infertility are sometimes reluctant to seek help. "It's a misconception that couples with secondary infertility shouldn't feel devastated," she says.

Adelman, who found emotional support helpful, says, "At first I thought, unless you are going to hand me a baby, then I'm not interested." She now acknowledges the importance of emotional support. "I realized I wasn't getting any joy out

of life." She says. "I wanted my life back; I wanted to value the wonderful life I had." Adelman tells her story while holding her second child, a beautiful 10-week-old daughter. Although she has been through a lot, Adelman says, "Whatever you do, if it works, it's worth it."

* Name has been changed for confidentiality.

Jean Sheff is the associate editor for Westchester Family.

Resources

• **Westchester Chapter of RESOLVE** – www.resolve-nyc.org, 914-686-1490, contact Dr. Ann Crane. Next meeting is April 10, 7 p.m. at Scarsdale Library. For directions, call 914-722-1300.

• **The Behavioral Management Infertility Program** – 914-584-4460, 10 Rye Brook Plaza, Suite 107, Rye Brook. Gayle D. Crespy, Psy.D., program director.