

Miracle of life after so much loss



SUCCESS: Ana Maria Escobar with her seven-week-old son, Emilio Johnson, who was born after six failed cycles of IVF.

Pictures: BRAD HUNTER

ROSIE SQUIRES
NATIONAL HEALTH REPORTER

AUSTRALIAN doctors are prescribing blood thinning medications and steroids in a radical new treatment for repeated miscarriages and IVF failures.

Scientists from IVF Australia believe women who suffer recurrent miscarriages or IVF failures could have an immune system that is too healthy - consistently rejecting any invading cells, including the fathers' genes.

By weakening the woman's immune system at the time of conception doctors say they can significantly improve the chances of pregnancy.

New mother Ana Maria Escobar had almost given up all hope of having a child after six failed cycles of IVF.

Cuddling her seven-week-old son Emilio, she said she could barely believe it when she conceived after trying the new technique. "I was so happy," she said.

IVF Australia Professor Gavin Sacks said the immune system has Natural Killer cells (NK cells) that protect it against invasion and infection.

"About 15-25 per cent of women who have repeated miscarriage or IVF failure have high levels of NK cells," he said.

"We decided to suppress the levels of NK cells leading to a better chance of conception."

THE BONDI PROTOCOL

■ A blood test shows the level of natural killer cells (NK cells) in a woman's immune system.

■ If high, the patient is prescribed oral steroid prednisolone and blood thinning medication clexane to suppress the NK cells.

■ The NK cells are weakened and less able to fight any invading cells, resulting in a higher chance of conception.

■ Of the 87 patients who had experienced repeated miscarriage or IVF failure, 53 per cent conceived after the Bondi Protocol.

■ Live birth rates were highest in women under 38 with high levels of NK cells (85 per cent).

Prof Sacks explained that he detects the levels of NK cells through a blood test.

If high, he will prescribe a low dose of the steroid prednisolone and a blood-thinning medication known as clexane.

"We know that these medications are safe and that they work," he said. "They are also cheap and available."

Women take the medication from the beginning of their cycle, until the third month of their pregnancy, Prof Sacks said.

He presented this approach, dubbed the "Bondi Protocol", at the Fertility Society of Australia conference in New Zealand last week.

In the study of 87 women (average age 38), 58 had at least six failed IVF cycles and 29 had six repeated miscarriages.

After the Bondi Protocol, 53 per cent had a successful pregnancy and live birth.

"Most patients succeeded in their first three cycles of IVF with the Bondi protocol, or within the first year of trying naturally in the miscarriage group," Prof Sacks said.

Ms Escobar, who is the creative director of Orotan, said that she had tried for five years to become pregnant.

"I really wanted to be a mum and I had lost my hope and faith by the end. I was getting to the point where I would cry when I saw pregnant women," she said. "I thought maybe I would never be a mum."

"The idea of playing with the immune system was a bit scary. But, this was the seventh time I was doing IVF, I knew it was the last time I was going to do it, I was already looking at adoption."

Ms Escobar gave birth to healthy son, Emilio, in September.

TVs for refugees raises ire

DANIEL WILLS
POLITICAL REPORTER

STATE MPs have complained that nearly 2000 refugees who have settled in SA in the past year are being given free televisions and whitegoods - but have not been made to attend English classes.

To give them a start, refugees receive settlement packages. These packages include free whitegoods, televisions,

washing machines and welfare payments.

Independent MP Bob Such, a member of State Parliament's social development committee, said refugees should be required to pay back the support once settled.

"To give them a big bag of goodies without any requirement that it be repaid ... sends a very bad message," Dr Such said.

"It creates ill-feeling in the community." He

added: "It's not a Christmas Island system. It's early Christmas."

Dr Such said the Federal Government should consider making attendance at English classes a condition of assistance.

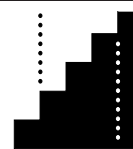
Another committee member, Family First MP Dennis Hood, said: "We should make sure that refugees are well cared for - but no more than people who are already here."

The national settlement

program is costing \$330 million a year.

A Federal Government spokesman said those getting the packages were "among the most vulnerable people in the world".

State Multicultural Affairs Minister Jennifer Rankine said: "Without the provision of these basic items, it is unreasonable to expect refugees to have any hope of making a fresh start in Australia."



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