

Happiness is... a shared egg

The Northern Echo 03/06/1999

Barry Nelson

David Little gets passionate about the subject of egg sharing - and looking at the smiling faces of the triplets he fathered it's perfectly understandable.

The little-known exchange scheme, which means women desperate for children can get free infertility treatment if they donate half of their eggs to help others, is set to expand in the North-East where it all began six years ago. David and Caroline Little from Skeeby, near Richmond, were among the first childless couples to take part in the pioneering scheme at the Cromwell Centre at Washington Hospital. After more than six attempts at IVF treatment at various hospitals - costing thousands of pounds a time - the couple finally hit the jackpot after joining the scheme.

"What really flabbergasted us was that the treatment at a private hospital was free and that some people were trying to stop it altogether," recalls 38-year-old David.

After undergoing IVF treatment 39-year-old Caroline produced a dozen eggs. Half were donated to help other childless women on the programme, who pay around £2,500 plus the cost of drugs. Caroline went on to have triplets in July 1996 at the Friarage Hospital, Northallerton.

Looking at Liam, Bryonny and Charles today, David Little says: "Who can possibly object to egg-sharing? We have three wonderful children and someone somewhere may have benefited from Caroline's spare eggs.

"What it has meant to us is difficult to put into words. To say it has filled a void would be the understatement of the century." Following a decision last December by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) curbs on egg-sharing have been relaxed, allowing the Washington centre to expand. So far around 250 babies have been born to women who have taken part in the Washington scheme. Around half of the births were to women donors who had free infertility treatment and the rest were to women who were the recipients of donated eggs.

Now embryologist Dr Kamal Ahuja, who pioneered egg-sharing at Washington together with his colleague Dr Eric Simons, is looking for more couples with infertility problems to contact the centre. A meeting for anyone interested in taking part in the scheme is being organised for July 14 at the Washington BUPA Hospital.

The scheme was developed in 1993 after patients approached Dr Simons at the Washington Hospital, and suggested that they could donate spare eggs in exchange for infertility treatment. Dr Ahuja said the initial fears that the exchange scheme could run into difficulties with the regulators proved well-founded.

But now, with the blessing of the HFEA, the scheme is surging ahead. With up to 100,000 women in the UK needing donor eggs but only 1,000 actually receiving treatment, Dr Ahuja

believes there is a huge potential demand for egg-sharing. The results so far from Washington have been far better than anyone could have expected. While the national pregnancy rate from IVF is around 17 per cent, the success rate from the Washington programme is currently 58 per cent.

“In the current programme we have had 82 pregnancies from 142 egg collections. After the frozen embryos have been used for a second attempt the success rate should rise to 66 per cent,” says Dr Ahuja.

In one group of women on the programme all 23 donors became pregnant, along with each of the 23 recipients. The success rate contrasts with the ten per cent pregnancy rate achieved by the traditional egg donation programme which uses eggs donated by volunteers.

“There are a number of reasons why our success rate is so good. Our IVF rates have been higher than the national average, we now have better treatment for male infertility and we select younger women who may be more suitable for the egg sharing programme,” says Dr Ahuja.