



Media Backgrounder: Conception Difficulties and Assisted Conception

What is the problem?

For millions of couples around the world, the inability to have children is a personal tragedy. For a significant proportion of them, the private agony is compounded by a social stigma, which can have serious and far-reaching consequences.

Those who are having difficulty conceiving experience a range of emotions, including feelings of inadequacy, anger, guilt and depression. These feelings and experiences can impact many aspects of a couple's life – their self-esteem, their relationship with each other, and their relationships with friends and family.

At least 10-15% of couples worldwide are unable to conceive without assistance. A WHO study in 2002 estimated this number to be in excess of 80 million.ⁱ A more recent study found that this number has increased to around 90 million.ⁱⁱⁱ Of that number, only a small proportion of couples (6%) actually receive the medical help they may require.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why 'difficulty conceiving', not 'infertility'?

For many people the term 'infertile' and the condition of 'infertility' are taboo subjects, which can prompt feelings of isolation, embarrassment or even shame and prevent couples seeking treatment. As such, the Assisted Conception Taskforce (ACT) are calling for doctors, journalists and other opinion leaders to refer to patients as having 'difficulty conceiving' rather than 'infertility'.

When should couples seek help?

Couples having difficulty conceiving should seek help when they have had no success after 12 months of regular unprotected sexual intercourse.

What can cause difficulties in conceiving?

The causes of difficulties in conceiving are many and varied. They



can include problems with either the sperm or the eggs, complications with the fallopian tubes or the uterus, endometriosis, frequent miscarriage, as well as hormonal and autoimmune disorders, which can occur in both men and women. Ovulatory disorders, such as irregular ovulation, account for approximately 20-30% of conception difficulty cases.

What is assisted conception?

Assisted conception describes the range of treatments available to couples who are experiencing difficulty in conceiving. Treatment options available to couples are not as daunting as most people think, with many modern treatments being simple, non-invasive and very effective.

Assisted conception treatment options:

There are in fact a number of routes that can be explored when thinking about assisted conception. Some of the most common forms of treatment are:

- **Ovulation Induction (OI)**

Up to 80% of women whose difficulties in conceiving stem from physical disorders, can be helped with assisted conception treatments that promote the growth and development of ovarian follicles. The most common medications used in this treatment are clomiphene citrate (also known as Serophene® or Clomid®) and gonadotrophins, which stimulate the body's production of follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) or replace it if the body is not producing enough/any of its own.

- **Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART)**

ART is usually used for patients who experience conditions such as blocked fallopian tubes, widespread endometriosis, male conditions and unexplained infertility. The most common ART techniques include:

- o **Intrauterine insemination (IUI):**



Intrauterine insemination is used to overcome male difficulties in conception by directly introducing seminal fluid into the uterus. This is also used in cases of mild endometriosis or cervical mucus of poor quality or hostile to sperm.

o In Vitro Fertilization (IVF):

In Vitro Fertilization is a process in which the egg and the sperm are placed together into a dish outside the body. The actual fertilization occurs spontaneously and the embryo is transferred into the uterus. This technique is used, for example, in cases of blocked fallopian tubes.

o Intra-Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI)

ICSI is a procedure in which a single sperm is injected directly into an egg. This procedure is most commonly used to overcome male infertility problems.

Across the world, education, availability and attitude towards assisted conception vary considerably. This is a subject which has been taboo since the first assisted conception birth took place over 25 years ago. It is time now to leave all negative perceptions behind and understand all the benefits that assisted conception can bring to people all over the globe.

References:

- ⁱ <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/infertility/index.htm>
- ⁱⁱ Kerr et al. National Infertility Awareness Campaign (NIAC) study, 1997.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Professor John Collins, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. Global Epidemiological Fertility Model.
- ^{iv} http://www.access.org.au/about_infertility
- ^v Serono International S.A. A tale of two hormones. Geneva: Serono, 1995.