

Egg donors share the gift of life

by Tina Smith

Imagine desperately wanting a child but not conceiving. Month after disappointing month turns into years of struggling to start your family.

You turn to specialists and brave the rigors of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) – tests, medications and procedures. You are poked and pricked, losing all sense of privacy and spontaneity while enduring hormone swings and other side effects. It seems to be working for others, but for you – still no baby.

Just when you've nearly abandoned all hope, a new option comes to light. You can choose a woman who will share her eggs with you.

Unconventional. Controversial. Intimidating. Without guarantee. Achieving your dream can mean going after it in a way that you never dreamed.

The first successful egg donation procedure was performed in 1983, and by 2000 donor eggs or embryos were used in more than 10% of all ART treatments. Originally proposed for women with premature ovarian failure, this approach now appeals to those who carry a genetic disorder, suffer multiple miscarriages or have premature menopause. Tests are available to assess egg quality, which typically begins to decrease after age 35. (The average man's reproductive decline happens much later in life.)

Potential donors are screened by fertility clinics and undergo exams, blood tests and psychological evaluations. The majority of clinics require donors to be non-smokers. Most donors are single women in their 20s or early 30s. Many remain anonymous by name but provide photographs and personal data to be reviewed by potential recipients. Couples receiving a donor's eggs cover all of her medical expenses and provide a fee for her time.

So now you are faced with choosing half of the genes of your child-to-be. Are hair color and eye color most important to you? What about personality traits or ethnic background? Does a donor's education history matter to you?

Once you choose a donor, she takes medication to stimulate her egg follicles. Simultaneously, you take estrogen and progesterone supplements to prepare your uterine lining for implantation. Next, the donor's eggs are harvested under anesthesia and combined with your husband's sperm to create embryos. Several days later, one or more of the embryos are transferred into your uterus. These sparks of life offer the potential for a baby to finally begin growing inside of you, a little one to nurse and hold and love. You wait an eternity for the pregnancy test two weeks later.

According to 2003 reports from the Centers for Disease Control, donor eggs were used in 12% of all reported ART cycles in nearly 400 fertility clinics across the nation. One live birth was achieved out of every two donor egg cycles (a 51% success rate). That same year, about 35% of women using their own eggs got pregnant through ART. For a woman who has not been able to get pregnant using other methods, her odds for success with donor eggs are as good as, if not better than, her chances with her own eggs.

Maybe it's the right option for you.