

Couples share embryos with those still fighting infertility

by Tina Smith

Embryo donation and adoption is gaining popularity in the assisted reproduction realm as a win-win option for both donors and recipients.

Currently, hundreds of thousands of embryos are in cryogenic storage across the United States. Many couples achieve pregnancy success before they use all of their embryos that were created during the in vitro fertilization (IVF) process and frozen for future use.

Couples who do not plan to or cannot attempt pregnancy again are faced with difficult decisions about their frozen embryos. While long-term effects are not known, embryos have survived up to 12 years of cryopreservation to produce viable pregnancies after thaw and transfer. At the same time, many clinics limit the number of years that embryos can remain in frozen storage due to space constraints.

Considered by many to be the most life-honoring solution, the newest option for those with extra embryos is donating embryos to couples who are unable to conceive on their own. Some women experience premature ovulation failure or early menopause, and fertilization of their eggs is virtually impossible -- even with micromanipulation technology. In other cases, men may not have any sperm available to attempt fertilization. Without viable eggs and sperm, these couples are not candidates for IVF and have no hope of pregnancy or childbirth with their own gametes.

Couples who have struggled with infertility but found success are often more than willing to share the blessing of potential children with others, typically anonymously. This generous gift allows couples who can't conceive to still experience the joys of pregnancy and childbirth.

Adopting couples cover all fees and expenses, so no costs are involved for couples who donate embryos. Potential embryo donors provide medical and genetic histories and may be required to undergo minor blood testing, although these couples have already been screened for infectious diseases prior to participation in an IVF cycle as mandated by federal regulations. Consent forms relinquishing all rights of embryo ownership also must be signed and notarized; however, some couples may choose to restrict to whom their embryos are donated. Ultimately, the genetic parents have no legal claim to any children resulting from the transfer of adopted embryos.

The cost for an embryo adoption can be substantially less than either using an egg donor or pursuing traditional adoption. Couples who wish to adopt embryos are required to undergo the same screening process as participants in any IVF Program and also must sign consent forms. A woman who will carry adopted embryos must have her uterine lining and hormone levels monitored by ultrasound scans and blood work prior to the embryo transfer.

Tina Smith is a communications specialist who serves as the patient support coordinator for the Fertility Center at 1624 Gunbarrel Road in Chattanooga and can be reached at 423.899.0500 or tina@MyFertilityCenter.com. For additional infertility articles, go to MyFertilityCenter.com and check under Support Central. To find out more about embryo donation and adoption, contact the Fertility Center's Embryologist Susan Walker. The clinic has been pleased to coordinate 12 embryo adoptions, with several successful pregnancies and pending transfers resulting. Although not all embryos survive the freeze/thaw process and not all transfers result in a pregnancy, the Fertility Center's success rate for frozen transfers ranges from 65 to 75% (slightly higher than the national average). The entire process is handled in-house at the Fertility Center, so no additional fees for outside agencies or contracted services are involved with anonymous donations and adoptions.