

UNDER THE SKIN OF IVF

Some couples who are having difficulty conceiving, even after undergoing IVF, are turning to acupuncture as an alternative. **Elaine Larkin** reports

WITH couples around the country going to extreme lengths to conceive a child, it's no surprise that some people are taking out in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) mortgages to afford repeated attempts to become pregnant through this treatment.

However, going by the results of an informal study into the success rates of acupuncture as a treatment for infertility, women around Ireland could increase their chances of conceiving by more than 100pc while paying drastically less than they would for IVF.

The study, by one of the foremost medical acupuncturists in Ireland, was shown exclusively to *Mothers & Babies*. It found that, following specific acupuncture treatment for infertility, 21 out of the first 30 women who presented at an acupuncture clinic became pregnant. This rate of approximately 70pc compares to an IVF rate of 30pc internationally. The success rate for acupuncture in China is 82pc.

While he has had patients seeking treatment for infertility before, he has noticed a big rush of patients in the past three years.

According to the study, treatment for infertility is not the preserve of childless women; it is also sought by women who have given birth before. "A few had children already but had entered the infertility stage," he says.

There are three types of patient — those who have had multiple failed IVF treatments, those who are undergoing IVF treatment and those who have never had IVF and are using acupuncture as the first line of treatment.

Some women have miscarried but have become pregnant again and given birth. Others have succeeded in having more than one child following their acupuncture treatment for infertility. "My first patient in this study was told that she would never be able to get pregnant naturally and was booked in for her first IVF treatment. She came to see me and cancelled her IVF appointment because she became pregnant. Now she is on her

third child," says Dr Jan.

The main causes of failure with any infertility treatment, according to Dr Jan, are age, obesity, stress and unknown gynaecological problems. The conclusions of this initial study are that acupuncture works to improve the chances of conception in patients who have failed with or are going through IVF procedures. It also concluded that it works for patients who have never had IVF or other infertility procedures.

He believes acupuncture should be a first-choice treatment for infertility in women because, he says, it is more effective, less costly and less traumatic, as it does not involve the use of hormones and invasive techniques.

He advises that people seeking acupuncture ask their practitioner what he or she worked at before becoming an acupuncturist. "One can then judge the level of medical knowledge that is behind his or her acupuncture expertise.

"It is folly to walk into an acupuncture clinic with a self-diagnosed problem and get treatment from an acupuncturist who was,

say, a car salesman or window cleaner before embarking on a career of treating someone's ills," he says. There are many conditions where time is of the essence and a proper diagnosis is necessary to institute proper treatment, for example, a tumour that has presented as a vague pain. Pain is a symptom, not a disease.

"There is little harm in getting acupuncture after a medical diagnosis of the condition has been made by a medical doctor or consultant," says Dr Jan.

Treatment involves the use of needles (inserted into the skin in various places), cupping (cups are placed on the skin with suction) and moxibustion (where the herb *artemesia vulgaris* is placed on an acupuncture point and burned).

According to Dr Jan, treatment for infertility is based on the patient's gynaecological and obstetrics history, Chinese pulse readings and other factors such as stress, obesity, menstrual history and so on. The acupuncture points are selected based on these observations.

The number of treatments required can vary but the effects of a course of treatment (six to eight visits) can last six months. "Most patients who come to me for arthritis or other health problems normally attend the clinic for about six visits. But for infertility that could be a few more — 12 to 18. Some patients have conceived after two or three visits. Each patient is special."

'[Acupuncture] is less traumatic because it does not involve hormones and invasive techniques'



Third time lucky

Seven-month-old Adam Kavanagh's birth by Caesarean section on 9 June, 2006 heralded the first day of parenthood for Anne Marie and Stephen Kavanagh, who had been trying for a child for several years.

The lead-up to Adam's birth involved IVF in Kilkenny and acupuncture in Waterford for the Co Wicklow-based couple. Anne Marie, 40, explains she had an ectopic pregnancy in 2003 and has had three IVF attempts since.

"After the ectopic pregnancy I lost a fallopian tube and discovered that the other one was damaged. I had tubal surgery and was then referred for IVF."

If she tried to get pregnant naturally, without the help of IVF, she says the chances are that it could be another ectopic pregnancy. She didn't conceive with the first IVF treatment.

Having read up on acupuncture, Anne Marie was interested in trying it as well as the IVF. "The clinic in Kilkenny where

I went for the IVF recommended Dr Jan and so I went there."

The second IVF was successful. "There was a big improvement in the quantity and quality of eggs collected. I was pregnant with twin boys but unfortunately we lost them last year. That was tough."

Again she returned to acupuncture and IVF, which resulted in Adam's birth. She was monitored by her doctor every week and her pregnancy was trouble-free.

The difference between the first IVF treatment (before she went for acupuncture) and the subsequent two treatments were the quantity and quality of eggs. "I wasn't sure if acupuncture was going to work but I thought it couldn't do any harm."

In hindsight, considering that the first IVF treatment didn't work, Anne Marie feels that acupuncture was a helping hand in her becoming pregnant the second and third time.