

In vitro fertilization: Egg donor gives 'ultimate gift'

Chicago woman finds donating her eggs not only helps others, but it pays well, too

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BY JIM RITTER

After watching friends go through the agony of infertility, the young woman decided she would try to help other couples have babies.

So she became an egg donor.

The 28-year-old woman, named Heather, was surprised to learn that donating eggs isn't just an altruistic act. Donors also receive substantial fees. The going rate in Chicago: \$7,000.

Heather, who asked that her last name not be used, has earned \$14,000 for donating eggs to two couples. The payments allowed her to pay bills and increase her savings. But while the money is welcome, Heather said she did it mainly to help.

"It's the ultimate gift," she said.

The use of donated eggs is becoming increasingly popular. The number of in vitro fertilization attempts that involved either donated eggs or donated embryos increased from about 5,000 attempts in 1995 to more than 16,000 attempts in 2005, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The major reason a woman's fertility plummets after age 35 is the diminishing quality of her eggs. Using donated eggs from younger women can greatly increase the odds an older woman can still have a baby.

About 12 percent of in vitro fertilization attempts in 2005 involved donated eggs.

"It's a more popular approach than it used to be," said Dr. Angie Beltsos of Fertility Centers of Illinois.

Paid by insurance

Heather is an unmarried fitness trainer who lives in the south suburbs. Internet research led her to Chicago-based Alternative Reproductive Resources. ARR recruits donors and supplies couples with eggs. ARR charges about \$12,000, with \$7,000 going to the donor.

By comparison, donors generally receive up to \$10,000 on the East and West coasts, but only \$3,000 to \$5,000 in the South, said ARR president Robin von Halle.

The in vitro fertilization procedure costs an additional \$10,000 to \$15,000. IVF is especially popular in Illinois because a state law requires many insurance plans to pay for it.

Through attorneys, Heather has signed contracts with the couples, whom she hasn't met. Each couple agreed to pay the \$7,000 fee and never seek child support from Heather.

Heather, in turn, gave up all rights to any child born from her eggs. She will not know the identity of any such child, and vice versa.

Heather underwent a battery of physical, psychological and genetic tests. She gave an extensive family medical history and provided pictures of herself from infancy to the present.

She used birth control pills to synchronize her cycle with the prospective mother's. To increase her egg production, she injected herself with fertility drugs two or three times a day for a week.

A doctor used a needle to remove eggs from Heather's ovaries. The eggs were fertilized in a dish with the prospective father's sperm, and one or more of the resulting embryos were implanted in the mother.

A risk: Torn ovaries

Donating eggs is far more difficult and risky than donating sperm. Egg donors face such risks as bloating, shortness of breath, blood clots and torn ovaries.

Heather said she experienced sharp mood swings and temporarily gained 20 pounds.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine said paying egg donors is an ethical way to "acknowledge the time, inconvenience and discomfort." Also, allowing payments increases the supply of eggs, enabling more infertile couples to have babies.

But the society's ethics committee also acknowledged there's a risk such payments could devalue human life by treating eggs as mere property.

The higher the price, the more incentive a donor has to disregard risks to herself and to conceal negative information, the ethics committee said. And if the price gets too high, only rich couples would be able to afford donor eggs.

The committee said payments greater than \$5,000 "require justification," and amounts over \$10,000 "are not appropriate."

Heather donated 10 eggs to one couple last July and nine or 10 eggs to a second couple last November.

If all went well, both couples would now be expecting children.

"If I can give that gift to have a family, it would make me feel wonderful," Heather said.

Heather is uncertain whether she will ever want to have a child of her own.

"There are a million reasons to say yes," she said, "and a million reasons to not have a child."