

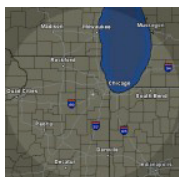
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Health

Ethnic couples face difficulty finding egg donors

By Judith Graham | Tribune reporter
February 26, 2008

This Indian couple hasn't spoken about it with family or friends, the choice they made after seven excruciating years of infertility.

Desperate to have a child, they turned to an egg donor.

It was a last-ditch effort to become pregnant, said Neetu, 34, and Rajiv, 38, who spoke to The Tribune on the condition that their last names not be used.

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Admitting that they couldn't create a baby together was painful enough. But finding an Indian woman willing to donate her eggs -- someone from their own culture -- proved agonizingly difficult.

"I was very upset, thinking we can't fail at this too," Rajiv said in a telephone interview.

On top of the heartache typical with infertility, ethnic couples face special challenges when it comes to finding egg donors.

Largely for cultural reasons, few young women of Asian, Indian, Jewish and Middle Eastern descent choose to participate in the increasingly popular form of assisted reproduction.

Their families wouldn't understand, young women understand, young women in demand, frequently don't want to undergo the taxing treatments needed to induce ovulation and the harvesting of their eggs.

Long waits

That means long waits for would-be parents who often have already tried other alternatives and who long for a baby that shares their genetic heritage. And sometimes, couples end up paying inflated fees.

Indeed, an Internet search turns up this ad from the University of California at Los Angeles student newspaper: "Couple seeking Korean egg donor. Compensation up to \$15,000." That's 50 percent higher than the maximum \$10,000 fee that leading fertility organizations recommend.

In the end, many ethnic couples have to settle for an arrangement that's not what they originally wanted.

Amy Demma, who runs Prospective Families in Wellesley, Mass., tells of a Chinese family who searched avidly for a Chinese donor for a long time, to no avail. Willing to

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adjust expectations for the sake of having a baby, they recently signed on with a young Korean woman.

Demma said she is currently advertising for Russian, Jewish, and Asian donors as well as an African-American/Native American donor on cyber communities where surrogates and egg donors congregate. (www.surromomsonline.com, <http://www.opts.com>)

Just outside San Francisco, Jacquelyne Gorton recently posted a Craig's List ad for an Iranian couple searching for an Iranian egg donor. "If the child ever asks, 'Where did I come from?' the mother wants to be able to say, 'You're Iranian,'" said Gorton, who runs an agency that matches donors with prospective parents.

Truthfully, she's somewhat pessimistic about the family's prospects. Muslim religious authorities have issued edicts condemning sperm or egg donation, and few Muslim women are willing to challenge traditions. "I'll recommend someone who looks like the woman, with dark hair and eyes, and she'll have to decide," Gorton said.

In Chicago, suitable egg donors for any of the in-demand ethnicities "get taken right away," said Robin VonHalle, who runs Alternative Reproductive Resources, a North Side agency that helps prospective families.

"We're always experiencing donor shortages," agreed Nancy Block, director of the Center for Egg Options in Northbrook, which charges a \$5,500 agency fee on top of a \$7,000 fee to compensate donors for their time and effort.

She estimates that one in every five families seeking an egg donor from her agency is Asian, Indian, African-American or some other ethnicity.

Indian donors are the hardest to find, and waits can easily take a year or longer, Block said. Many families hedge their bets by contacting multiple agencies and scouring the Internet for prospects, she noted.

Rajiv and Neetu were living in Boston, an area with severe donor shortages, when they went through six unsuccessful in-vitro fertilization (IVF) cycles. With IVF, a man's sperm is combined with a woman's egg outside the womb, and the resulting embryos are transferred to the woman after three to five days of growth.

Always wanted a child

The couple had always longed for a child, and the failure to conceive was deeply depressing. In time, the marriage began to crack under the strain, Rajiv said.

Dr. Samuel Pang, their physician at Reproductive Science Center of New England, said staff encouraged Rajiv and Neetu to look for an egg donor, knowing that it would be difficult.

The couple would consider only an Indian donor. "It was very important to us that the child share our ethnic background," Rajiv said. But they spent two years trying almost half a dozen donor agencies, with no luck.

Finally, after contacting a newspaper for Boston's immigrant Indian community, a reporter wrote a sympathetic story about the couple, whose real names were kept secret. Almost 20 Indian women wrote in, wanting to help Rajiv and Neetu. In the end, the couple selected a 33-year-old Indian woman with one child whose husband accepted the arrangement.

The first try failed, but the second time, using frozen embryos from the first cycle, Neetu became pregnant. She's expecting in July. "I have a lot of cautions, but once I saw the ultrasound, I allowed myself to be happy," Neetu said. "We've waited for this for so long."


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