

Women's Clinic Ltd. observes 20 years of its in vitro fertilization program with a birthday party that draws 37 couples and 68 children.

By Bruce R. Posten
Reading Eagle

There are no guarantees in life, but apparently there are miracles.

Wendy Moore, 53, of Muhlenberg Township knows this is true because she always believed she was meant to be a mother even though she faced overwhelming odds that did not support that belief.

Seeing life prevail against all sorts of obstacles, Dr. Vincent A. Pellegrini, 60, knows about miracles, too. He has 20 years of photographs that prove they exist - the snapshots of babies, tots, teens and young adults.

And for Carrie Moore, 20, there is no question.

Miracles?

She is one.

Carrie, a junior at Allentown's Cedar Crest College, majoring in dance, is the result of the second successful in vitro fertilization in Berks County.

She joined her mother in Pellegrini's West Reading office shortly before the observance of the 20th anniversary of the Women's Clinic Ltd. and a "birthday celebration of life" at Reading Hospital.

The event drew 37 couples and 68 children - two sets of quadruplets, one set of triplets, 14 twins and an assortment of singles, spanning a generation, all as colorful if not as numerous as the bright balloons that surrounded them.

The children are the result of collecting eggs from a woman's ovaries and sperm from a man and then transferring normal embryos from a laboratory to the woman's uterus for continued growth.

"Thank you for trusting us and giving us the privilege to be involved in your lives," Pellegrini, a gynecologist/obstetrician and president and clinical director of the Women's Clinic Ltd., told those who came to publicly share with others the joy of their lives - their children.

Issues respected

But those in attendance didn't reflect everyone touched by the in vitro program in Berks County over the years. Issues of privacy, morality and even psychological duress were respected.

"It can be difficult for couples with infertility issues," Pellegrini said. "It can wear them out emotionally. As a physician, it's hard to remain detached from these patients."

For his part, Pellegrini presented the concept of in vitro fertilization (an egg fertilized with sperm in a laboratory dish and implanted in a woman) to the Women's Clinic board in 1984. It was immediately approved.

From the beginning, he said, the understanding with patients was that all normally fertilized and dividing embryos would be replaced in a patient in a single cycle without discarding or freezing embryos.

About five months ago, Pellegrini said his medical colleague, Dr. Shahab S. Minassian, a board-

certified infertility specialist, began an embryo freezing program that gives patients another option, but, for personal and moral reasons, Pellegrini opts not to participate in that.

He noted, however, that using frozen embryos avoids using all the fertility stimulation drugs and the egg/oocyte (not fully matured eggs) retrieval procedure.

Quoted recently in a national publication addressing the moral debate involving freezing of embryos, Pellegrini said: "A fertilized egg is human matter and, therefore, I don't feel it can be discarded if it is alive, if it is dividing. I don't have a problem with the technique of freezing, except for the fact that it means there's a good potential that the frozen embryos are not going to be needed."

Anything to have a child

Gently setting aside the moral debate, some parents faced with the reality of desperately wanting children might say they would do almost anything to have a child.

And, it appears, many parents such as Wendy Moore have done exactly that.

"Wendy is in a different category," Pellegrini said. "She is one of the most persistent people I have ever met."

"I couldn't have asked for a better mother," said Carrie, describing Wendy as a caring woman, with deep faith and unfathomable strength,

Wendy said she and her husband, Jeffrey, a Navy veteran and electronics engineer, married in 1979 and tried unsuccessfully for nine years to have a baby.

Before her successful pregnancy, Wendy suffered with stage four endometriosis (abnormal tissue growth) causing pain and infertility. She underwent four laparotomies (open incision operations), seven laparoscopies (belly-button operations), including one for in vitro fertilization in 1986 with no oocytes (not fully matured eggs) obtained.

She also had treatment for an ectopic pregnancy (fertilized ovum develops outside the uterus) in the left fallopian tube.

According to Pellegrini, Wendy had fertility treatments: three cycles of clomid (five days of fertility pills each cycle) and 19 cycles of gonadotropin fertility medication injections (daily injections for seven to 10 days each cycle with multiple ultrasounds and blood tests), in addition to the gonadotropin injection used as part of her four in vitro stimulation cycles that covered a period between 1986-87.

Wendy had three miscarriages and one ectopic pregnancy before her fourth successful pregnancy in mid-1987.

Pregnancy complicated

But even that pregnancy was complicated by her previous miscarriages. She required steroid medications and that was also related to the partial placental abruption (25 percent separation of the placenta) that occurred at 34 weeks gestation - six weeks early, Pellegrini said.

Hospitalized for weeks, Wendy also had gestational diabetes and finally had an emergency C-section on March 8, 1988.

Carrie was born, five pounds, six ounces, healthy and happy, the second successful in vitro baby in Berks.

"What Wendy went through is truly amazing," Pellegrini said.

"I have always lived my life by faith," Wendy said. "Only God can know if you will have a baby ... but I

was convinced I was supposed to be pregnant."

Her quest to have a child took a toll on her marriage, Wendy admitted, It strained an inherently loving relationship for a time, she said.

"My husband died of cancer five days before his 45th birthday in 2001," Wendy said. "He was a hard-working man who did everything he could to provide for his family ... and he showed great bravery and courage (before his death)."

And so did Wendy, before and after Carrie's birth.

"Having Carrie has fulfilled my purpose in life," Wendy said. "For me, Wendy is the most wonderful gift, because the greatest job a woman can have is to be a mother."

•Contact reporter Bruce R. Posten at 610-371-5059 or e-mail bposten@readingeagle.com.

Berks in vitro history

The following information about the in vitro fertilization program in Berks County was supplied by Dr. Vincent A. Pellegrini, president and clinical director of the Women's Clinic Ltd., West Reading.

- First successful conception occurred April 1987. Patient delivered a child in January 1988. Wendy Moore of Muhlenberg Township was the second successful patient. She gave birth to her daughter, Carrie, on March 8, 1988.

- About 275 patients have successfully conceived in the last 20 years. There have been 350 births. three sets of quadruplets, seven sets of triplets, the rest twins and singles. Program has a multiple pregnancy rate of 30 percent, with most of these being twins.

- Background for early procedure: "In the beginning, we inseminated six oocyte (eggs that have not yet matured) in all patients," Pellegrini said. "The fertilization rate was 65 percent then, which would mean that statistically we expected to get four embryos. All four embryos would be transferred to the uterus. If pregnancy occurred, it would be statistically unlikely to continue with more than 50 percent of what was put back, or two fetuses.

"Obviously, all six oocytes could fertilize and all six embryos would be transferred and take, but the odds of that was less than 2 percent.

"We averaged transferring 4.2 embryos per patient for years. Our pregnancy rate was initially quoted as an anticipated 20 percent, then 25 percent and then it was 30 percent for a long time."

- Procedural changes: "As our implantation rate for embryos improved (the probability that each embryo would implant in the uterus), our pregnancy rate improved," Pellegrini said. "We then began to decrease the number of oocytes we were willing to inseminate from six to five, then to four, to decrease the risk of multiples.

"About six years ago, we went to a variable number of oocyte inseminated, four, three or two, depending on the clinical situation of each patient; in very rare cases five.

"Our fertilization rate has increased to 80 percent over recent years, which is very high. We expect to get two to three embryos for transfer if three to four oocytes are inseminated. This holds true as we now average replacing three embryos per patient. Embryo transfer is done three days after oocyte retrieval, usually at the six to eight cell stage."

- Pregnancy rates continue to climb: 50 to 56 percent in 2005, 2006 and 2007 and 40 percent before that. In 2008, the clinical pregnancy rate per embryo transfer was 41 percent. The national average

has been about 40 percent over these years.

- There is not a higher birth defect rate or miscarriage rate with in vitro fertilization. The miscarriage rate is about 15 percent compared to 18 percent for spontaneous pregnancies.

New fertility method

This month, the Women's Clinic Ltd., will begin a new process of oocyte freezing, using the same technique as used for embryos, according to Dr. Vincent A. Pellegrini, president and clinical director.

"This will be an option for those patients choosing not to freeze embryos," Pellegrini said. "It eliminates the moral/ethical dilemma of leftover embryos and discarding of embryos.

"After selecting the best oocytes (not fully matured eggs) to inseminate fresh, the remaining oocytes will then be frozen for future use, just like freezing embryos."

When needed, the oocytes will be warmed and inseminated, a few at a time (two or three), using the technique known as intracytoplasmic sperm injection.

"I wanted this process for years," Pellegrini said. "It has been a very technically difficult procedure, but it is now much improved and perfected."

There are now more than 700 babies born worldwide with oocyte freezing, he said.

Pellegrini said doctors have averaged obtaining 12 oocytes per retrieval over the years, and only use a relatively low dose of fertility stimulation to avoid developing too many oocytes.

Twins change families' lives

By Bruce R. Posten
Reading Eagle

When Anthony Rodriguez, a senior doorman at the Four Seasons Hotel, Philadelphia, met Colleen Kelly, who worked for an insurance company, they were destined to become longtime friends.

In fact, they enjoyed about 15 years of friendship.

But eventually they wanted to become more than just buddies.

They became man and wife. That was the easy part.

Having children - a family - was a bit harder.

"We both always wanted children," said Colleen, 35, "but we tried for about a year without any luck."

Anthony, 49, who said he was diagnosed with sperm antibodies, said he and his wife were referred to Dr. (Vincent) Pellegrini at the Women's Clinic Ltd., West Reading.

"We had some testing and were told the only way I would get pregnant is through in vitro fertilization, but there

were no guarantees," Colleen said.

No guarantees- but after four attempts along came Amber and Meghan, now 13-month-old twins who couldn't have made their parents prouder or happier.

The family recently joined dozens of other parents and children at a 20th anniversary celebration of the in vitro program at Reading Hospital.

"Meghan is just about ready to walk and Amber is rolling," said Colleen.

The couple, who reside in Mohnton, credited family and friends with easing the strain to raise the twins, whose journey to life wasn't easy for them or their mother.

Hospitalized for eight weeks, Colleen said her pregnancy was marked with complications relating to blood flow to the placenta. Ultimately, the Rodriguezes learned of chromosome and heart problems that affected Amber, who has Down syndrome.

"Amber had open heart surgery in May to close a hole in her heart and she is doing fine now," Colleen said.

The twins have changed the lives of the Rodriguezes; Colleen is a stay-at-home mom and Anthony is working hard to support his new family.

"If we could afford it, we'd do it again (have more children) in a heartbeat," Colleen said.

For the Rodriguezes, the birth of children is the keystone to being a family.

"For years, I did what I wanted when I wanted, but now I come home, open the door and can't wait to see my girls," he said.

Families adjust to the joys and challenges of having twins

By Bruce R. Posten

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Brown-eyed Reese and blue-eye Emma Stauffer, fraternal blonde-hair twins, seem destined to become Olympic gymnasts.

The 4-year-olds can already gracefully roll, spin and tumble over a chair and couch, giggling and smiling all the while, while their more sedentary parents just stare in amazement.

"They are nonstop energetic," said their mother, Lisa, 33, of Leesport, a dental receptionist.

"Yes, I always wanted kids," said her husband, Brian, 35, a mechanical engineer. "I wanted them to be 18 before I turned 50 so I could do things with them, and be active and not just sit on the sidelines."

And it appears Brian will have his wish. The girls will keep him young.

"There was a time I wanted lots of kids, maybe six or seven" Lisa said. "But having two at a time - well, that's an experience."

Yet the Stauffers have adjusted to the challenges of raising a family after facing complicated reproductive issues that might have prevented them from having children without in vitro fertilization.

In particular, they praised Michele Haas, embryologist at the Women's Clinic Ltd., as being particularly caring in their case, helping to address their specific difficulties in trying to conceive a child.

"She's an embryologist, but we call her our angel," Lisa said.

* * *

"Boy, you must have had those kids awfully close together."

If Brian and Suzanne Hart of Ruscombmanor Township heard that comment once, they must have heard it a dozen times.

Their 14-year-old fraternal twins, Erica and Jeff, freshmen in the Oley Valley School District, are certainly distinct and different, but they are very close as siblings.

"Born in 1994, they are numbers 98 and 99 in the in vitro program," said Brian, 53, a mechanical designer. "And whenever Sue and Erica take off to go somewhere, Jeff is the first to ask: 'Where did they go? When are they coming home?'"

A close-knit, supportive family, the Harts feel blessed just to have twins, according to Suzanne, 47, who tried for three years to have children with her husband.

"I had a couple of surgeries, but nothing worked and we so wanted to have children," she said. "Dr. Pellegrini finally suggested in vitro.

"I had five embryos transferred and was told there was a possibility of five children, but that the likelihood of that was slim."

But they did get two children, a boy and a girl.

Erica can claim seniority as first-born, weighing a slim 5 pounds 3 ounces at birth.

Jeff is able to boast that he is the younger sibling, but originally weighed in at six pounds.

"They were easy babies and are really good kids," said a proud Brian. "You go through life working and planning ... you take having children for granted. But it's not always easy.

"There are times when we thought we were just going to be alone, but then I just look at them (his twins)."

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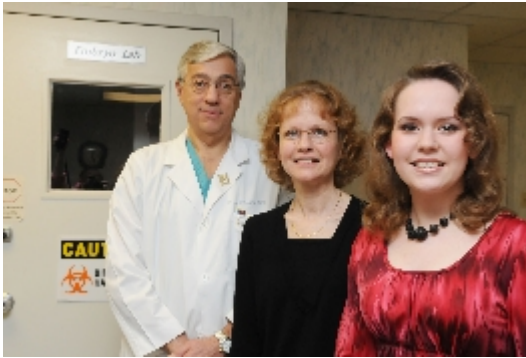
Reading Eagle: Susan L. Angstadt

Carrie Moore, 20, left, and her mother, Wendy, 53, of Muhlenberg Township enjoy a moment together at the recent 20th anniversary party of the Women's Clinic Ltd., West Reading, in vitro fertilization program held at Reading Hospital. Carrie is the program's second in vitro baby.



Reading Eagle: Susan L. Angstadt

L-R Dr. Vincent A. Pellegrini, director of Reading Hospital's In Vitro program, with Carrie and Wendy Moore in 1990. Carrie was the second In Vitro baby born in the program. She is now 20. 12/27/08.



Reading Eagle: Susan L. Angstadt

Dr. Vincent A. Pellegrini joins Wendy Moore, center, and her daughter, Carrie, 20. Pellegrini is the clinical director of the Women's Clinic's in vitro program. They are shown here in the office laboratory.