

Changing Conceptions

Last week we discussed the birth of Louise Brown, the first child born though the medical advance now called In-vitro fertilization, IVF. It was called test-tube babies in the popular press, even though this term never appeared in any medical report or discussion. It is also a misnomer since no test tube is used and the embryos are created and develop in a petri dish. Louise Brown celebrated her 40th birthday recently and during those 40 years IVF has both developed tremendously and become a very widely used and accepted procedure.

When Prof. Edwards won the Nobel Prize for his pioneering work in IVF in 2010, approximately four million individuals had been born through IVF. Today that number is probably in excess of 5 million and rising. IVF has become so common that just in Israel the estimate is that 1 in 20 births are as a result of fertility treatment and IVF. All developed countries have a significant number of children conceived through IVF annually.

In 2010 the Nobel Prize Committee wrote "Today, Robert Edwards' vision is a reality and brings joy to infertile people all over the world." However as advanced as we have come in developing reproductive technologies we have also learned a tremendous amount about how little we actually know, control and can understand.

Why do some eggs not fertilize, and why do some fertilized eggs not implant in the uterus? While we can treat the symptoms of infertility, in most cases

we do not know the cause of the infertility. While it appears that children born from IVF are healthy it is still too early to emphatically state that IVF is safe, and the large doses of hormones given to women undergoing IVF, even when it is a male factor, do have negative consequences. IVF is a salvation but must be used wisely and sparingly.

IVF has given rise to a myriad number of possibilities and has changed our entire conception of conception, pun intended. If we can create fertilization ex-vivo, out of the body, then one woman can supply the egg, a man who she does not know can supply the sperm, the fertilized egg can be implanted into another woman's uterus and then be raised by another couple. This can solve problems but also create new problems such as the question of motherhood and fatherhood, that we have discussed in this column a number of times. More on this next week.

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