

NEW PROCEDURE AIDES CONCEPTION

AGNES DIGGS Staff Writer

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MURRIETA ---- Mike and Heather Yarbro went through a lot to gain the title of parents.

They tried for three of the seven years they've been married to conceive a child, with little hope for success ---- until they met "The Werl."

The Murrieta couple married young, Heather said, and were in no hurry to have children at first. Mike was from Irvine and owns a marine electronics business. Heather was a pharmaceutical sales representative who grew up in Lake Elsinore, where her family owned a business. She has two sisters who live in Lake Elsinore. One has children, Heather said, and "everything went off without a hitch ---- lucky girl."

Heather, 30, and Mike, 31, spent the early years of their marriage working on their careers, Heather said. They began a concerted effort to conceive about three years ago. In January 2000, she became pregnant, but miscarried. About six months later, she was pregnant again, but lost the embryo within a month. Though heartbroken, they refused to give up. During the following year, Heather said, they applied themselves to reaching their goal.

"We tried it all," she recalled. "Relaxing, thinking about it, not thinking about it, ovulation kits, thermometers, spending crazy dollars on crazy contraptions ---- the whole thing. But nothing was helping us."

The awful truth

The two were discouraged, she said. Every doctor they went to told them something different. Eventually they learned that when she became pregnant, her body recognized it as something else, Heather said.

"My body didn't recognize that I was pregnant," she said. "It looked at the fetus like a cancer ---- me, but a little bit altered. Basically, my immune system killed the baby."

Her body was not forming the maternal antibodies needed to protect the baby, she said. "I was able to get pregnant, but I wasn't able to keep it."

They were eager for a child, but heartsick from their losses and unsure what to do next. Then one of her husband's employees, who had gone through a similar ordeal, told her about Orange County fertility specialist Dr. Lawrence Werlin ---- aka "The Werl."

The problem

Infertility is a disease of the reproductive system that impairs the body's ability to perform the basic function of reproduction, according to information from the American Society of Reproductive Medicine, formerly the American Fertility Society. Infertility affects about 10 percent of the reproductive-age population, men and women equally. Conception, according to the society, depends on many factors ---- the production of healthy sperm by the man and healthy eggs by the woman; fallopian tubes that allow the sperm to reach the egg; the sperm's ability to fertilize the egg when they meet; and the ability of the fertilized egg -- -- the embryo ---- to become implanted in the woman's uterus. For the pregnancy to continue to full term, the embryo must be healthy and in an environment adequate for its development. When just one of these factors is impaired, infertility can result.

'The Werl'

Werlin, known to many as Orange County's Father of Fertility, is reportedly the longest practicing reproductive endocrinologist and infertility specialist in Orange County. He began his career in 1980 conducting groundbreaking research on Lupron at the National Institutes of Health. Lupron is used as a treatment for endometriosis, tissue growth in abnormal locations including the ovaries. In 1986, he founded Hoag Hospital's Fertility Services Center in Newport Beach, a program he directed for 10 years. He later founded and is currently the director of Coastal Fertility Medical Center in Irvine and Aliso Viejo. Werlin offered hope through a medical breakthrough that increases the chances for pregnancy for high-risk couples. He had conducted a study evaluating the effect of Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis -- -- examining an embryo for gene abnormalities before implanting it. The study revealed that applying the process during in vitro, or test tube, fertilization could improve the chances for a healthy birth.

The most common problem couples have, he said, is called aneuploidy --- too many or not enough chromosomes, the microscopic bodies that carry the genes that determine characteristics. Embryos that have that condition either don't implant at all and pregnancy doesn't occur; or they implant and don't last 12 weeks; or they get beyond 12 weeks and may last until birth, he said.

In Werlin's procedure, he stimulates the ovaries to get the eggs, artificially inseminates them, then

performs a biopsy on them to determine their viability. Only the normal ones are returned to the uterus. Nature then determines which ones will survive.

"It's not always successful and that's the difficult part of the job that we do," Werlin said. "The best part of the job is when we can tell them they're pregnant and they go out and do well."

Bad news, good news

The Yarbros found in Werlin a sense of humor and an answer to their prayers, they say. The Werl, who looks kind of like Albert Einstein with long, blow-dried hair, put the couple through a series of tests. Heather said that when she got the results, she became discouraged for the first time.

"I always had hope until I found out what my problem was," she said. "Then I started freaking out. I thought it was never going to happen."

Still, they stubbornly refused to give up. They first tried artificial insemination. Some of the things Mike had to do during that phase were embarrassing for him and put a bit of a strain on the relationship, Heather said. The process had to be completed two or three times a month, and the sperm sample had to be delivered to the office within 45 minutes to remain viable, she said. The shy Mike always made her take it into the office, she said, even

though all the other patients were there for pretty much the same reason.

Werlin, who plays Rolling Stones songs in his patient waiting rooms, says his favorite one is "Can't Always Get What You Want." Some of his patients claim their children recognize the music at birth, he said. "It makes me feel good," he said. "And if I feel good, hopefully I can make them feel good."

The insemination process didn't work for the Yarbros, and the couple decided to take a break to consider their next move. They even considered adoption and surrogacy, Heather said. Finally, on the eve of the 25th anniversary of the world's first test tube baby, Louise Brown, they chose in vitro fertilization. Werlin harvested eight eggs from Heather and fertilized them. Three of the embryos survived, two boys and a girl, and were able to be implanted. Only the girl was able to hold on.

Family matters

Werlin gave Mike and Heather the good news, monitored their progress through the first 12 weeks, then transferred them to an obstetrician. Heather is on bed rest these days as a precaution. She is due to deliver around June 15.

Their parents shared their trials and tribulations, she said. Her mom and dad, Frank and Sonya Matthies, who own Elsinore Pine and Lumber in Lake Elsinore, went with her for the

ultrasound to see the sex of the baby. Mike is an only child, and his folks, Anne and George Yarbros of Temecula, are "ecstatic" to be having their first grandchild, Heather said. Her advice to couples in the same situation is not to shy away from fertility treatments.

"You just have to believe that (a child) is in your future and stay strong," she said. "And I've been doing a lot of praying. That's what's kept me going. And I truly believe in Dr. Werlin."

Werlin's practice sees about 500 new couples each year, he said. About 15 percent of the reproductive population seeks help nationwide, he said. More people are asking for help now that it is available, but there are still no guarantees, he said.

"I believe in this procedure without a doubt," he said. "But it's like anything ---- it's not necessarily the answer to every question."

In addition to Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis, the clinic performs artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization. He credits his team for the success of his PGD procedure, including the head of the lab, Thom Nass, and embryologist Ellen Marelo.

"The people in the lab make the difference," Werlin said. "They're the ones that handle the gametes, the sperm, the eggs and the embryos. They're the real 'artists.'"