Unsuccessful in Vitro Fertilization: A Follow-Up Study

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Results from a follow-up questionnaire completed by 28 women who had unsuccessfully completed one or more trials of in vitro fertilization (IVF) are reported. The mean time lapse since completing IVF was 8.4 months. During that period, 33% of the respondents had applied for adoption and 11% had secured an adoptive child. More than half the respondents had abandoned biological attempts to conceive and 52% felt as though they had "resolved" the infertility crisis. Nevertheless, 93% of the respondents indicated that they would participate in any new reproductive options that would enhance the likelihood of a biological pregnancy! The results and implications of this study are discussed.

KEY WORDS: unsuccessful in vitro fertilization (IVF); IVF follow-up; infertility crisis; reproductive options after IVF.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the increasing popularity of in vitro fertilization (IVF) programs for women with a variety of infertility problems, the rate of successful births via IVF is modest, ranging anywhere from 0 to 28% (1). While prospective IVF candidates are generally given clear factual information about the likelihood of successful conception via IVF, the majority of couples opting for these procedure believe that they will somehow "beat the odds" and become pregnant (2).

To date, there has been little research documenting how women deal with the disappointment of one or more unsuccessful in vitro fertilization attempts. What research has been done has tended to focus on the immediate aftermath of an unsuccessful IVF procedure. This study was undertaken to investigate how infertile women viewed their in vitro fertilization experience in retrospect and to assess their outlook regarding future reproductive options.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

From May 1983 to May 1985, 109 patients had attempts at oocyte retrieval in the In Vitro Fertilization Program at UMDNJ—Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. Couples are referred to this program by their gynecologist or infertility specialist, typically after years of unsuccessful attempts to overcome their infertility. All applicants are mailed a detailed description of the program which includes information about each phase of the procedure, program costs, and current success rates. If they formally apply for program entrance, they are interviewed by one of the program physicians and the clinical director. Following this evaluation and subsequent presentation of each patient to the entire IVF staff, patients are contacted regarding acceptance into the program.

Following transfer, the patient is told to contact the program coordinator if she begins menstruating. At that time, she is offered supportive counseling over the phone and invited to contact the team psychologist if she and/or her husband desire further counseling. Women are subsequently invited to attend a supportive follow-up session at the hospital with other women who have been unsuccessful in their IVF attempts. Included with their invitation is...
a brief IVF follow-up questionnaire with a stamped addressed envelope.

The follow-up questionnaire consisted of nine objective multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions. (See the Appendix for a copy of the questionnaire). The latter questions focused on whether and how the women felt she had resolved the "infertility crisis" and come to accept the fact that she might never parent a biological child and also invited the woman to note in writing any thoughts about her experience with infertility, the IVF program she had completed, and her current life.

RESULTS

Of the 109 women from whom oocyte retrieval was attempted, embryos were transferred in 92 women. Nine patients became pregnant. Eighty-three patients were unsuccessful in attaining conception.

Of the 83 women who were mailed the IVF follow-up questionnaire, 28 returned completed questionnaires, giving a response rate of 34%.

Forty-six percent of the respondents had undergone only one IVF attempt, 18% had undergone two attempts, 29% had undergone three attempts, and 7% had completed four attempts.

The mean time lapse since their last IVF attempt for the entire sample was 8.4 months, with a maximum time lapse of 17.8 months.

Reproductive Options Attempted After Unsuccessful IVF

As shown in Table I, a number of reproductive options were explored following unsuccessful IVF. Thirty-three percent \((N = 9)\) of the respondents applied for adoption and 11\% \((N = 3)\) were successful in securing an adoptive child. Seven percent \((N = 2)\) advertised for a surrogate mother, and 4\% \((N = 1)\) initiated pergonal therapy. None of the women contacted a different IVF program.

Fifty-six percent \((N = 15)\) of the respondents indicated that they had decided to abandon attempts to conceive a child biologically since their last IVF procedure. Table II lists the factors contributing to this decision. The factor cited by the greatest number of respondents was the women's need to reestablish a sense of normalcy in life (32\%). Lack of finances was cited by 25\% of the respondents, while a sense of futility was noted by 29\% of the women. Unwillingness to undergo additional surgery was cited by 21\%. Less common factors included lack of spouse support (7\%), the arrival of an adopted child (11\%), and physician recommendation to stop trying (4\%). No women cited work commitments as a factor discouraging conception attempts.

Resolution of the "Crisis of Infertility"

Fifty-two percent \((N = 14)\) of the women responded affirmatively to the question, Do you feel as though you have "resolved" the "infertility crisis"; that is, come to accept that you may never parent a biological child? When asked whether or not their husbands had also "come to closure" regarding the unlikelihood of having a biological child, 59\% \((N = 16)\) of the sample responded affirmatively.

Of the 15 women who indicated that they had abandoned biological attempts at pregnancy since

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenthood option</th>
<th>% agreement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Applied for adoption</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Secured a child through adoption</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Advertised for a surrogate mother</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Contacted another IVF program</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Started Pergonal</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Other</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>% agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Working to reestablish a sense of normalcy in life</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sense of futility</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lack of finances</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Unwillingness to undergo more surgery</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Arrival of adopted child</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Lack of spouse support</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Physician recommendation to stop trying</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Work commitments</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
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*While IVF patients are extremely cooperative in completing all kinds of assessment instruments prior to IVF, there is generally less willingness to complete questionnaires following unsuccessful IVF. However, the response rate of one-third is rather typical of that generally obtained through follow-up mail questionnaires.