

HEALTH

Ancient medicine for a modern problem

Today, one in six couples can't conceive. In vitro is expensive and doesn't always work. So some are turning to traditional Chinese treatments such as acupuncture. And as, LESLIE GRANT TIMMINS reports, finding themselves on fertile ground

Our GP couldn't tell us why we weren't getting pregnant," says Shannon Kush, a 31-year-old student of sign language and deaf studies in Vancouver.

Ms. Kush and her husband, Garrett, a chiropractor, have a four-year-old daughter, but after two years of trying to conceive another child and failing, they were considered to have "unexplained infertility."

A friend recommended traditional Chinese medicine and Ms. Kush reluctantly decided to try it. After three months of acupuncture and herb treatments, she was pregnant.

Today, one in six couples in North America is infertile and 15 to 20 per cent of them will never know why. Add to this the fact that women are delaying childbearing to pursue careers and that Western medical treatments offer women aged 35 to 39 only a 30-per-cent chance of conceiving, and it's not surprising that there's a boom in other kinds of medicine. Some fertility clinics in Canada are now recommending acupuncture to their patients.

Chi (pronounced chee), or energy, is the basis of Chinese medicine. An imbalance of chi at any point in the body's system can cause symptoms or disease. To correct an imbalance, herbs and acupuncture are prescribed. Supporters say traditional Chinese medicine is nontoxic and relatively affordable compared with Western reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), which costs on average of \$10,000 and more.

"We couldn't afford in vitro," Ms. Kush says candidly. She had already tried a fertility drug for six months and undergone surgeries for endometriosis, a condition in which the lining of the uterus attaches outside the organ, causing scarring.

Although skeptical of the theory of Chinese medicine and terrified of needles, she decided to try the treatment. The herbal mixtures "tasted like dirt," she says, but after only a month of taking them and having acupuncture treatments, she saw changes. "My nails weren't splitting any more and my hair stopped falling out. After a couple of months, my PMS lightened. My menstrual cramps, which usually had me curled in a fetal position on the bed at least a day a month, went away.

Now pregnant, Ms. Kush is due to give birth in July.

She was treated by Lorne Brown, a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine. "In Western medicine, PMS is considered to be normal and isn't associated with infertility," Dr. Brown says, "but in Chinese medicine it indicates a subtle imbalance that needs to be corrected."

Hair loss, which suggests prolonged stress, is also associated with infertility. "If the stress is reduced and the chi is able to flow freely," he explains, "all parts of the body will be nourished, including the hair and nails."

In treating infertility, Dr. Brown follows the principle that you must "nourish the soil before planting the seed"- improving the overall health of the reproductive organs in order to optimize conception. "Ideally, I treat women for about three cycles with acupuncture and Chinese herbal mixtures to regulate their menstrual periods and balance their hormones," he says. "The quality of the egg and the health of the baby are influenced by the woman's health during this time."

Dr. Brown refers to recent medical studies showing that acupuncture can increase blood flow to the ovaries and uterus. "This improves the quality of the eggs and thickens the uterine lining, making it more receptive to implantation."

He treats patients who are trying to conceive naturally as well as those who are preparing for IVF and other reproductive technologies.

It was a combination of IVF and acupuncture that helped Brenda Swartlikoff, 38. She and her husband, Jason, had been trying to have a child for more than five years. After her first IVF embryo transfer, Ms. Swartlikoff suffered a miscarriage. After two more unsuccessful transfers, she tried insemination, but no luck.

"Somewhere in there we began adoption procedures," she says. I also decided to see a Chinese-medicine doctor."

After several months of acupuncture treatments alone, Ms. Swartlikoff tried another IVF and became pregnant. She soon noticed some changes. "Within a month of starting the acupuncture, my cycle went from 33-32-31 days right to 28 days and it remained like that through my entire in vitro process. And I felt so relaxed after each treatment, like I'd been to a spa."

Just over a week ago, she gave birth to a healthy girl.

Although Western science has just begun to investigate the 2,500 year-old traditions of Chinese medicine, studies support Brenda Swartlikoff's positive experience.

"Acupuncture is one of the hottest things in the infertility field right now," says Alice Domar, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and director of the Domar Center for Complementary Healthcare at Boston IVF, a large fertility clinic.

"From a scientific point of view, the research on acupuncture and infertility is tantalizing," Dr. Domar says. 'A 2002 study by [Dr. Wolfgang] Paulus got worldwide attention and showed a lovely increase in pregnancy rate using acupuncture during in vitro fertilization cycles.'

Published in the prestigious medical journal Fertility and Sterility, this study compared two groups of 40 women aged 21 to 43. One group received acupuncture to relax the uterus, the other did not. Twice as many of the women who received acupuncture became pregnant.

But Dr. Domar remains cautious. "Other studies have not been as supportive of the hypothesis and suggest it may be a placebo effect. We need more data."

Stephen Hudson, an obstetrician and gynecologist, and medical director of the Victoria Fertility Clinic on Vancouver Island, has no such reservations. I recommend all of my patients who are undergoing treatments such as IVF consider acupuncture. I think it relaxes them. Anything that positively affects your mental and physical health is going to help you improve the odds of getting and staying pregnant."

It takes two

A year ago, Tom Nadeau of Montreal was diagnosed with male infertility factor. A salesman, he attributes his very low sperm count and motility to the heat and constriction of long work hours in his car every summer.

Male infertility factor accounts for one-third of infertility in couples. Female infertility accounts for one third, but most assisted reproductive technology is aimed at women.

Both Mr. Nadeau (not his real name) and his wife, Joan, opted to be treated by Aina Zhang, a doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine - Ms. Nadeau, 38, to optimize her general health and Mr. Nadeau, 33, for infertility.

Following Dr. Zhang's advice, Mr. Nadeau reduced his work hours, changed his diet, drank teas made of specially prescribed Chinese herbs and underwent once-a-week acupuncture treatments. "I was skeptical at first," he says, "but now I like the Chinese philosophy of balancing everything. It takes awhile, but the results are there."

After a year of seeing Dr. Zhang, Mr. Nadeau's semen analysis shows normal levels. A 2005 study published in the medical journal Fertility and Sterility backs up his experience. It showed significant increases in the number and motility of sperm in men who had acupuncture treatments.

Three weeks ago, the Nadeaus used intrauterine insemination to try to conceive. The procedure, in which sperm is injected directly into the uterus, requires healthy sperm. For Tom Nadeau, it was no problem.

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