

3 Million IVF Babies

LONDON, JULY 1, 2006 (Zenit.org).- More than 3 million babies have been born as a result of in vitro fertilization treatment. News on the IVF numbers came from Jacques de Mouzon, of the International Committee for Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ICMART), reported Reuters on June 21.

The announcement came during the annual meeting of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology, held June 18-21 in Prague, Czech Republic. The ICMART report, which includes data from 52 countries, covers two-thirds of the world's IVF treatments.

The report noted the uneven distribution of IVF births. Nearly 56% of all IVF treatments are in Europe. And almost half of the techniques are performed in four countries -- the United States, Germany, France and Britain.

The news on the numbers of babies born through IVF was well received by the secular media. But other reports from the conference were not so positive. A June 19 press release by the organizers reported on research presented at the meeting warning that the conditions in which embryos are cultured in the laboratory during IVF could be causing genetic errors. These errors are associated with developmental syndromes and other abnormalities in growth and development, such as low birth weight.

The fears come from research on genetic imprinting in mouse embryos. That research has shown that certain culture media and concentrations of oxygen altered the expression of several imprinted genes. Imprinting is the process by which some genes are activated or inactivated depending on whether they have been inherited in chromosomes from the mother or the father. The results, however, are only preliminary, cautioned Paolo Rinaudo, a scientist at the Center for Reproductive Sciences, University of California, San Francisco.

Another problem treated at the meeting was that embryos conceived using IVF have a higher chance of being male, the Australian newspaper Sun-Herald reported June 25.

Australian embryologist Jean Scott told the conference that this phenomenon took place when the embryos are grown for a longer period of time before being implanted. When the egg and sperm are mixed outside the body, and the embryo is grown to a blastocyst before being transferred back to the woman, there is a 56% chance the child would be a boy.

IVF Australia director Dr. Ric Porter said this occurred due to the fact that doctors would select the embryo that was dividing fastest and these tended to be male, reported the Sun-Herald.

Fraud warning

The conference also heard of the need to be on the guard against identity fraud. Dr. Luca Sabatini, from the Center for Reproductive Medicine at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London, said that research had

shown that many clinics in the United Kingdom felt they did not have sufficient safeguards to properly check patients' identities.

The St. Bartholomew's Hospital team surveyed 70 licensed clinics in the United Kingdom. Of these 45 responded, and 37% reported they had experienced or suspected cases of patient identity fraud.

"Our overwhelming feeling is that there are insufficient measures to protect the unit, the patient's legal rights, and most importantly the future welfare and well being of the unborn child," said Sabatini.

Fraudulent behavior can involve attempting to obtain public funding that would normally exclude the patient. It can also occur when the couple in the process of being treated splits up and one of them tries to continue the treatment with a different partner. Or there can be cases when sperm from a younger man could be substituted for an older one, while maintaining the pretense that the older man will be the legal father.

Weeding out the "unfit"

The most controversial theme raised during the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology conference was over genetic screening. British doctors announced they had developed a new test to detect genetic disorders in embryos, Reuters reported June 18.

Instead of searching for an altered gene linked to an inherited illness, the new test looks for DNA fingerprints, or markers, near the gene. In this way the problematic embryos are excluded and only healthy ones are used for implantation during the IVF process.

The test was developed at Guy and St. Thomas' National Health Service Foundation Trust in London. So far it has been used on seven women, five of whom are now pregnant.

Criticism of the new test was immediate, reported Britain's Daily Mail newspaper the next day. "It is not about taking an embryo and curing it," said Josephine Quintavalle, of Comment on Reproductive Ethics, "but about diagnosing and then throwing away."

Simone Aspis, of the British Council of Disabled People, warned: "Screening out autism would breed a fear that anyone who is different in any way will not be accepted. It would create a society where only perfection is valued."

The Daily Mail also published an opinion article alongside the news report, by Virginia Bovell, mother of an autistic 11-year-old, Danny. After declaring she was "appalled" by news of the test, Bovell explained that she well understood the difficulties of having a child with autism.

But, she added, "the 'problem' lies not with autism itself but with the way in which our society responds to it." For a start, the government could help couples with handicapped children a lot more, Bovell contended.

"Yes, caring for him can be draining and isolating, but I can unequivocally say that Danny is the best thing that has ever happened to me and the idea that we might have somehow been 'better off' if he had never been born is intolerable," she concluded.

Others, however, welcomed the announcement of the new test. Sunday Times columnist Minette Miriam, writing on June 25, described the new technique as almost "godlike" and called it the best news she had heard for years.

She rejected the criticisms that getting rid of embryos with problems was playing God. "But what on earth is wrong with humans playing God?" wrote Miriam. "I am all for it, especially as God doesn't seem to be doing it." She concluded: "What a piece of work is a man and partly, now, it is the work of godlike humankind."

Valuing life

Earlier this year Benedict XVI defended the value of life in its first stages, offering a notably different interpretation of how God values life. His comments came in a Feb. 27 address to participants in a congress titled, "The human embryo in the pre-implantation phase," organized by the Pontifical Academy for Life.

We can find a number of references in sacred Scripture, the Pope noted, that show God's love every human being, even before they are formed in the womb. In Jeremiah 1:5, God told the young prophet: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you."

"God's love does not differentiate between the newly conceived infant still in his or her mother's womb and the child or young person, or the adult and the elderly person," the Pontiff explained. The human person, he continued, is endowed with a very exalted dignity, rooted in the bond with the Creator. This exists in every person, in every stage of life. For this reason the Church defends human life as sacred and inviolable from the moment of conception until its natural end. That inviolability is under increasing threat these days.

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