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Cape clinic helps droves of infertile couples

Helen Grange
January 03 2009 at 10:01AM

South Africa has a well-priced and desirable commodity to offer the world - human eggs.

Infertile couples from all over the world are increasingly choosing local fertility clinics to realise their dreams of conceiving, and like the phenomenon of plastic surgery safaris, they are linking their reproductive missions to affordable holidays.

The most popular clinic among couples from the US, the UK, Australia, Europe and countries in Africa is the Cape Fertility Clinic, run by doctors Paul le Roux and Klaus Wiswedel.

"We are getting between 30 and 40 foreign visitors a month seeking egg donations, and it's because the medical care here is very good and highly personalised," says Wiswedel.

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The Cape Fertility Clinic is among four clinics listed on the web site www.renewfertility.com, a US-based site founded by Californian Robin Newman.

Newman herself came to South Africa looking to redress her childless status, found its facilities world-class and now helps others find help through her web site.

The site features a comprehensive list of tariffs for hotels and lodges, as well as an egg donation programme - which Wiswedel tags at between R35 000 and R45 000 over a 10 to 12-day period.

"The Internet has enabled fertility clinics to compete globally," says Wiswedel.

"Our competitors are not in South Africa - they are in Cyprus, Moscow and Spain.

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"We help with finding couples accommodation and they are also spending millions on the tourist attractions in and around Cape Town. Most importantly, we are giving them a gift they desire most in their lives, which is very gratifying."

Most egg recipients are women in their late 30s or 40s who, owing to putting their careers first, left child-bearing too late.

At the Sandton Fertility Clinic, director Dr Goolam Mohamed puts about three or four foreign couples a month into egg donation programmes.

The first egg donation programme in South Africa took place in 1986. The programme has a 45-70 percent success rate, depending on the age of the donor, as fertility is defined by the age of the eggs.

Waiting periods for donors in the past were long - up to two years, but egg donor agencies have helped to shorten the period.

"The donor agencies we use are very professional," says Wiswedel.

"Egg donors are carefully screened. They are provided with support through the whole process, so they know exactly what they're in for."

One of the agencies which seek donors mainly via its web site, is baby2mom, founded by Jenny Currie. Though running for just less than a year, it has so far achieved 15 pregnancies from 39 egg donor programmes.

Although egg donation is the most successful of fertility treatments, it is not without risk.

Donors are given, for two weeks, powerful hormones to stimulate their ovaries to produce a batch of eggs - usually between 10 and 20.

These drugs can cause bloating and irritability, but in isolated cases can lead to a rare, life-threatening condition called "ovarian hyperstimulation".

There have also been a few reports of donors left sterile by the egg retrieval process.

But Dr Johan van Neuburg, of the Medfem Clinic in Joburg says the risks are negligible if the procedure is done by a reputable fertility clinic with skilled medical staff.

"If the donor is stimulated in a controlled and careful manner, and well-monitored throughout, it should not compromise her health or fertility in any way," he says.

Mohamed confirms this, adding that a South African donor won't be used more than two or three times.

Under the Human Tissue Act, donors are not permitted to be paid for their eggs. They are, however, entitled to compensation or a gratuity for time spent on the donor programme and transport.

Currie says many of the donors are housewives ideally between the age of 18 and 34, medically and psychologically healthy, with an acceptable body mass index (not too underweight or overweight).

Donors with a history of genetic or familial illness will be excluded.

A team approach is used to screen donors, involving doctors, social workers and professional nurses.

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The donor is involved only up to the point when her egg is harvested. The only information she is entitled to is whether the recipient achieved a pregnancy.

She remains anonymous, as do recipients. The eggs are retrieved on the day the donor ovulates.

The recipient would have been prepared to receive the egg, which is fertilised with her partner's donated sperm and grown in a special medium before being implanted in her womb five days later.

After two weeks a pregnancy test is performed.

"We try to match up the donors as closely as possible to the recipients, physically and racially, so the children look like their parents," says Currie.

"Although the recipient isn't the genetic mother, these children tend to assume other familial characteristics from being in the presence of their parents, such as laughing, talking and walking mannerisms."

Currie says egg donation is a way to deal with infertility in a confidential manner, and many recipients opt to keep details of their child's conception a secret.

While all people are different, the opportunity to have children that carry at least half the family's genetics is "often the most dreamt-about and greatest wish for many, and a way to complete and balance their lives", says Currie.

- For more information, visit www.capefertilityclinic.co.za, www.sandtonfertility.com or www.baby2mom.iblog.co.za

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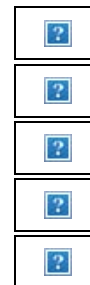
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