

FAMILY LIFE

A moral alternative to treating infertility

Technology developed by Catholic doctor treats underlying causes that prevent conception

By Valerie Schmalz

Perform a Google search for “IVF” and pages after pages of options pop up — medical centers and clinics all over the United States and in much of the world touting techniques geared to creating babies in petri dishes and inserting them into women’s uteruses.

In vitro fertilization is one of the most high profile and popular of the reproductive technologies that have offered hope to many of the more than 7 million American women of child-bearing age the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates suffer from infertility. But IVF, artificial insemination and other similar techniques come at a high cost, financially, physically, emotionally and spiritually, says Dr. Anne Mielnik, director of Gianna — The Catholic Healthcare Center for Women, at St. Vincent Medical Centers in New York.

The Gianna Center is a full ob/gyn practice that is pioneering in New York an alternative to IVF called NaPro Technology, “natural procreative technology” developed in Omaha, Neb., by Dr. Thomas Hilgers, founder of the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction. The Gianna Center offers medical care in keeping with all Catholic teachings.

Overwhelming need

Mielnik is amazed by the number of women grappling with infertility she has seen since the practice opened its doors Dec. 8 in Manhattan.

“Almost every day a woman sits down in my office and begins crying and tells me that for years she has looked for someone to help her with her infertility in a way that is consistent with her values, and received no care from the doctors in this city,” Mielnik said. “Women tell me stories of being laughed at, mocked and derided by doctors when they say they have infertility but they don’t want to do anything that would violate their conscience.”

Mielnik said about 70 per-



Andrea and Matthew Mack with their son, Aaron. Courtesy photo

cent of couples have been helped to achieve a successful pregnancy using NaPro. Compare that with a success rate for IVF at 45 percent after three cycles of treatment and 51 percent after six cycles.

“The standard in medicine in infertility is to do very little evaluation into the underlying cause of infertility,” said Mielnik, adding some IVF clinics even advertise that they don’t need to know what causes the infertility. “Infertility is a symptom of something. In medicine, because of the advent of artificial reproductive technologies, like IVF, research into the underlying causes of infertility has come to a standstill.”

Underlying causes

IVF involves the creation of embryos in a laboratory that are then implanted into the uterus. If the embryos begin to grow, one or more are almost always aborted. Unused embryos are frozen and stored.

With NaPro, women use a specially designed method to track their cycles and find the underlying causes of their infertility. The doctor then prescribes either medical treatment or surgery aimed at making conception possible.

The Catholic Church teaches in *Donum Vitae* (“The Gift of Life”), published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1987, that IVF and artificial insemination are never morally acceptable because — aside from the obviously immoral practice of aborting embryos — fertilization occurs “outside the bodies of the couple through actions of third

SAINTLY NAMESAKE

The newly opened Gianna Center in New York City is named for St. Gianna Beretta Molla, an Italian physician, wife and mother of four who died in 1962.

Ill during her fourth pregnancy, she refused a potentially lifesaving hysterectomy — which Church teaching would have allowed — in order to save her baby. She was canonized in 2004.

parties whose competence and technical activity determine the success of the procedure.”

“Such fertilization entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists,” the document continues, “and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Such a relationship of domination is in itself contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children.”

According to the Pope Paul VI Institute website, NaPro Technology presents for the first time a thorough understanding of normal and abnormal menstrual cycles. This emerging science provides treatments that cooperate with the menstrual and fertility cycles, based on 30 years of research of information learned through the Creighton method of monitoring women’s fertility, a natural family planning method.



Dr. Anne Mielnik, founding director of Gianna — The Catholic Healthcare Center for Women, chats with a patient in the center’s newly opened office in New York. CNS photo by Gregory A. Shemitz

Hilgers has found that 80 percent of infertility in women who have regular cycles is caused by endometriosis, Mielnik said. It can only be diagnosed correctly by laparoscopic surgery and is often completely treated by in-patient hospital surgery. Endometriosis is a condition in which the cells that line the inside of the womb, the endometrial cells, implant outside of the womb. They can implant on the tubes, ovaries or the intestines and create inflammation that is toxic to embryos, sperm and eggs, Mielnik said.

Getting results

Rhonda Moseley, 33, is one of Hilgers’ success stories. Moseley’s little girl turned 1 on Jan. 19, after she and her husband tried for years to conceive. Moseley said she went to a doctor in Nebraska who did tests, told her she had “unexplained infertility” and recommended starting her on a series of shots and medicines. That is when Moseley remembered an article she had seen about Hilgers, and she and her husband turned to

the Pope Paul VI Institute for treatment. After three months of careful charting of her cycles, and two surgeries to remove endometriosis and ovarian cysts, Moseley became pregnant.

Andrea and Matthew Mack are expecting their second baby in about a month, with their oldest, Aaron, 27 months, also a credit to Hilgers. Andrea Mack is now a NaPro practitioner, training couples to chart cycles to achieve pregnancy.

Matthew Mack said his interest was in the scientific approach. “What appealed to me was the medical side and everything that was involved in that. I didn’t do it just because the Catholics backed it.” However, he said, “through the process, our understanding of our faith became pretty strong.”

Added Andrea: “We were fortunate that we came across it when we did. As soon as people hear about this program, their first response is, if only I had heard about this two years ago, or 10 years ago, or 20 years ago.”

Valerie Schmalz is an OSV contributing editor.

More information is available at: <http://www.naprotechnology.com/>