

Acupuncture offers infertility hope

KATE TAVENDER
FOR NEIGHBOURS

The joys of pregnancy are hard-earned for lots of couples. Infertility is a growing problem that plagues between 8 and 15 per cent of would-be parents. The good news is there are various assisted reproductive technologies available in Calgary to people willing to go down that road. But before you go there, you might want to know about less invasive alternative therapies like acupuncture that have surprisingly positive results.

Just ask Catherine (not her real name) and her husband. They were anxious about their ability to conceive, since Catherine's mother had problems and needed fertility drugs to become pregnant. After six months of trying, Catherine was already concerned that she'd have the same difficulties as her mom.

Based on her family history, her doctor fast-tracked her referral to the Regional Fertility Program, but while she waited, she stumbled upon an article touting the benefits of acupuncture in improving fertility. She decided to give it a try.

"We just thought it couldn't hurt to do something other than just wait for these referral appointments with the fertility clinic," says Catherine, who'd by then had a blood test to confirm she wasn't ovulating.

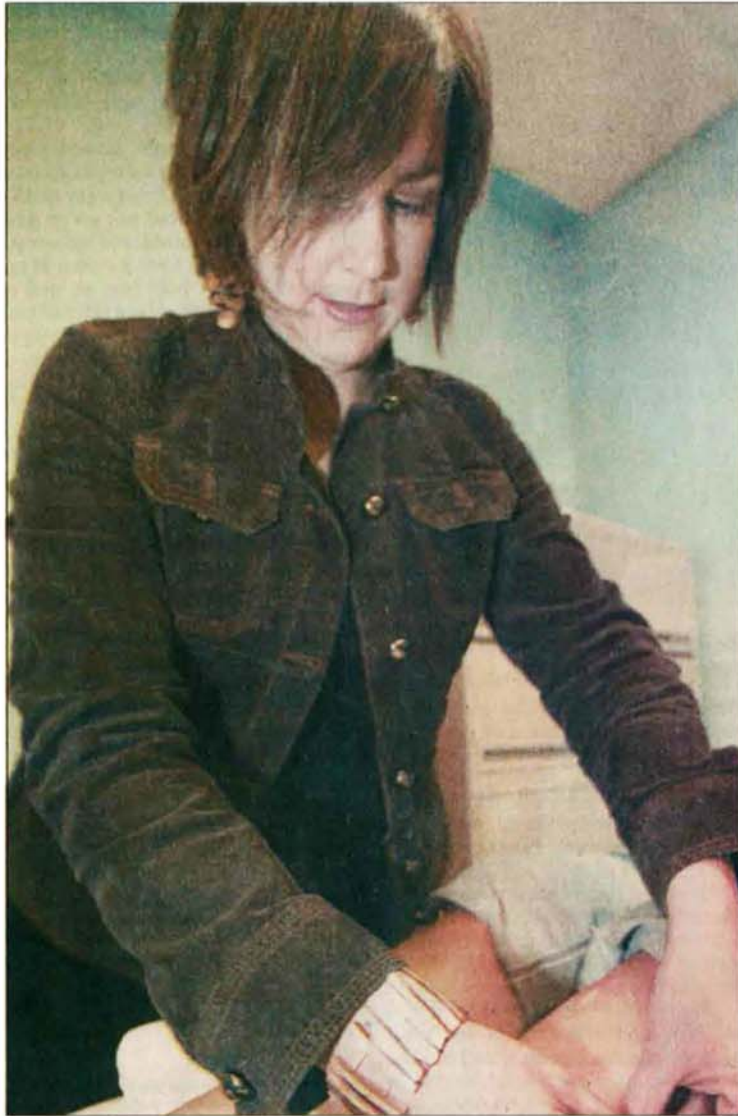
"Of my girl friends — there are six of us — five of them were pregnant with no trouble at all. So I was looking for anything that would give me some sort of hope while I was waiting."

In August she began seeing Leslie Ring-Adams, a registered acupuncturist and doctor of traditional Chinese medicine who specializes in treating couples with fertility issues.

"I found it was such stress release. I really got to look forward to what I called my needle nap," says Catherine. "She'd stick me full of all these needles and put on the blanket and soft music and I'd just zone out."

As it turns out, it did a lot more than just relieve stress. After only two months of bi-weekly and then weekly sessions — and just before she was about to begin the fertility drug Clomid — Catherine got pregnant.

"I totally credit (acupuncture) for this pregnancy," says Catherine, now seven weeks pregnant. "I totally credit



Wil Andruschak for Neighbours

Leslie Ring-Adams demonstrates the use of acupuncture needles on a patient.

Leslie and the acupuncture with making me ovulate and re-establishing whatever balance there was supposed to be in my body so it would do what it's supposed to do."

There's nothing new about the ancient practice of acupuncture and its ability to promote fertility.

"The first reference I ever found to treating infertility with acupuncture

was from a reference to a book in 6 A.D. Cultures around the world have obviously been battling infertility for many years," explains Ring-Adams who also treats patients while they undergo various medical fertility interventions including in vitro fertilization (IVF).

have prompted more people to seek acupuncture." These recent studies show how successful acupuncture can be for both men and women. One shows a 57 per cent increase in normal-form sperm after 20 treatments. Another study shows that 42.5 per cent of IVF patients became pregnant with acupuncture compared to the control group, of which only 26.3 per cent got pregnant, without acupuncture.

Numbers like these helped convince Narda Simpson to seek out acupuncture in conjunction with her IVF treatments.

"I would never have gone to acupuncture before reading the research on it," explains Simpson, who was initially skeptical.

"I guess when you're in a desperate situation you'll do anything and everything to get pregnant."

Indeed her situation was desperate as it is for many couples struggling with infertility. She'd undergone several intrauterine insemination or IUI treatments and even miscarried before she began IVF. It was through a support group that she learned about acupuncture improving IVF success rates.

It proved to be very successful since Simpson is now the proud parent of a son and twin girls thanks to IVF. She also credits acupuncture for helping her through this tough time.

"It provided serenity when you're going through a very emotional process," she says.

"In addition, I just felt that this is going to help. You're doing everything

possible to make this cycle successful."

How it works is that a needle in your body causes a neural response, says to Ring-Adams. It sends a signal to your brain telling it something isn't right. Then the brain can send out the appropriate bio-chemicals or hormones to fix the problem.

"We're kind of kick-starting the body to fix itself," she says.

It also helps regulate gland functions in women and increase blood flow to the pelvic region — factors that are critical to fertility.

"We can regulate cycles, regulate flow, regulate painful periods, induce ovulation," she explains.

"It also can help prevent miscarriages and support pregnancies."

Still there's no guarantee, but with virtually no side effects and marginal costs (about \$60 a session) that are often covered by extended health care plans, there's nothing to lose.

"Acupuncture sometimes takes a while. We look at it as if we're cultivating the soil before we plant the seed.

We're optimizing pre-conception. So I love to work with women two to three months before they start this process."

If nothing else, it gives people something positive to do for themselves while they wait — a wait that for Catherine was well worth it.

"The more success stories that I read and the more Internet research that I've done, it's really incredible," says Catherine, who continues to have acupuncture to support her pregnancy.

"People who are really at the end of their rope are able to conceive."