

CHANNEL 9 "SUNDAY" COVER STORY

Missed conceptions: part 2

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The in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) industry is experiencing a boom, mainly because more and more older women are queuing up at fertility clinic doors. Many are experiencing age-related fertility problems — the consequence of having delayed child-bearing into their mid to late thirties, as we reported in part one of our cover story last week.

Some have chosen to put off motherhood for social or economic reasons, but many others simply haven't been able to find a partner willing to commit to starting a family earlier. Fertility doctors are deeply concerned that older women are increasingly relying on IVF to help them out if they can't conceive naturally.

Fertility expert, Dr Ric Porter, says: "Technology has advanced so much, that we've made a rod for our own backs. We've become that much more successful in the art of producing the artificial baby in the lab, that women expect they can always have recourse to that technology."

The sad fact is, however, while IVF success rates have improved for women in their twenties and early thirties, that improvement has not generally been passed on to older women. For example, IVF offers a less than 10 per cent chance of resulting in a baby for a 40-year-old woman. By the time she reaches 45, the chance of becoming a mother drops to about one per cent. Yet many women are prepared to endure the expensive and invasive fertility treatments in the hope they will beat the statistics.

Dr Beverley Vollenhoven, from Monash IVF, told *Sunday*: "While IVF will help women who may have problems with their fallopian tubes and whose partners who may have a problem with their sperm, but it can't make eggs better."

A tiny minority of women are lucky enough to fall pregnant naturally in their mid-forties. *Australian Women's Weekly* editor, Deborah Thomas, defied the conception odds by giving birth to her son Oscar when she was 46. "I think it was about 0.01 per cent of getting pregnant naturally at that age. I think I was actually off the Richter scale," said Deborah.

But for those women whose 40-odd-year-old eggs are no longer viable, their only chance of becoming pregnant is by using an egg donated by a younger woman. In Australia, egg donation is still relatively uncommon. While advertising for an altruistic egg donor is legal, buying or selling any body parts — including eggs — is not, thereby reducing the donor pool to close friends or family who are willing to go through the IVF mill for free.

IVF can be a physically, emotionally and financially draining journey. As well as involving invasive medical procedures, fertility treatment can also be very expensive. While Medicare picks up the tab for many of the procedures, out-of-pocket expenses can add up to thousands of dollars per attempt. Yet despite all this, many brave and determined women are prepared to endure an IVF roller-coaster beset by failed attempts and miscarriages, in their quest to have a child.

For support and information about infertility issues, contact ACCESS Australia Infertility Network. Their phone number is: 1800 888 896. Or you can click on their website: www.access.org.au.

Film Transcript ...

HELEN DALLEY: The delight of newborn babies beginning life's journey. They're what mothers' nesting instincts have been all about as they prepare for their birth. Awaiting motherhood is usually a time of nervous anticipation for pregnant women. Leesa Meldrum is no exception.

LEESA MELDRUM: This baby is going to have a very warm head.

HELEN DALLEY: Except that in this case, for Leesa, there is no baby coming. She's not even pregnant, despite years of trying.

HELEN DALLEY: So why did you buy baby clothes before you had the baby?

LEESA MELDRUM: Well I don't know - just hoping. You know, there's always hope. It seems to be my favourite word.

HELEN DALLEY: It doesn't make you too upset?

LEESA MELDRUM: It does, because, you know, if I don't have a child, I'm going to have to get rid of them.

HELEN DALLEY: Leesa Meldrum, now in her early 40s, has already gone to incredible lengths to fulfil her dream of having a baby.

LEESA MELDRUM: I think I've probably been further than anyone in the country, because I've been to the Federal Court, the High Court. I would probably leave the country to become a mother, if I had to go to adopt, yeah. If I had to give up my lifestyle here, I certainly would.

HELEN DALLEY: Leesa fought through the courts for her right as a single woman to gain access to IVF in Victoria. She eventually won after a challenge from the Catholic Church.

LEESA MELDRUM: It's been a long time coming so nobody is more happier than what I am today.

HELEN DALLEY: While a crucial victory for single women, for Leesa, it was hollow.

LEESA MELDRUM: It will be a victory. It will be a better victory than this, really, to have a baby in my hands one day.

HELEN DALLEY: As tortuous and controversial as that legal fight was, it's nothing, she says, compared to the harrowing 15-year physical and emotional journey she's been on to try and have a baby.

LEESA MELDRUM: Well, it's the most important thing in my life, you know, and it's why I'm still trying, even after everything that I've been through. It's on my mind every second of the day. I think about it all the time. I think about my future with a child. It's just what I have planned. So I guess I'm still determined to make that dream come true. Every breath is for a child to come into my life.

HELEN DALLEY: And Leesa's not alone. As we saw last week, for some women, the hunger for a baby is palpable.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER, JOURNALIST: The desire to have a child, possibly when you know you probably can't, is just overwhelming. The force of it is ferocious when it's there and it can knock you sideways, it can knock you off balance. There are a lot of women, like me, that cocked it up and then were really shocked when they found out that things like medical intervention couldn't fix things or, you know, they'd left it too late.

HELEN DALLEY: And the anguish suffered by other women who can't easily conceive in their late-30s or who find out too late they have infertility problems is often intense.

DOMINIQUE OGILVIE: I would love the privilege of having a child. So I just felt I would be incomplete without that.

TERRI FLYNN: It's very important. I hadn't realised quite how important until I started this process and it it's made me even more determined. But I always planned on being a mother.

HELEN DALLEY: Yet those whose business is to help couples have babies are deeply concerned that women are increasingly relying on IVF to help them out.

DR RIC PORTER, IVF AUSTRALIA: The technology has advanced so much that we have made a rod for our own back. We have become that much more successful in the art of producing the artificial baby in the laboratory, women think they can always have a recourse to that sort of technology.

DR BEVERLEY VOLLENHOVEN, MONASH IVF: What women don't realise is that IVF may not be - or not give them the success that they want. As you get older, the numbers of eggs that you have in your ovary and their quality diminishes. It diminishes after 30 and again after 35 and then there's a great fall-off after 40. And while IVF may help women who have problems with their tubes or partners have a problem with their sperm, IVF can't make your eggs better. You're born with the greatest number of eggs you're ever going to have and it's downhill after that, unfortunately.

DR RIC PORTER: The problem is, when you're 40 years of age, you are ovulating a 40-year-old egg. So the egg, if you like, runs out of puff, and when the sperm gets inside the egg, it's the egg doing most of the work. In the older egg, they don't fertilise as well and they don't grow as well.

HELEN DALLEY: In recent years, older women lining up at the clinic door have fuelled much of the boom in

fertility treatments, yet the sad fact is while IVF success rates have somewhat improved that improvement is not for older women.

DR BEVERLEY VOLLENHOVEN: Increasingly, since I've started in this field, my patients are getting older, and I think it's a problem. It's very sad when you have to tell women that their chance of pregnancy is low with IVF.

HELEN DALLEY: At age 35, according to the fertility experts, if you're having problems conceiving, IVF could offer help.

DR RIC PORTER: At that age, IVF probably still offers them an advantage over natural conception, but, my gosh, it's an expensive, an unnatural and interventional way of doing it.

HELEN DALLEY: What about your chance of success of a live baby at the end, not just a pregnancy, at the age of 40?

DR RIC PORTER: Probably less than 5 per cent - 5 per cent is probably a conservative figure.

HELEN DALLEY: As you go over the age of 40, IVF offers only a tiny chance of having a baby. By the age of 45, it's just 1 per cent or 2 per cent.

DR RIC PORTER: One per cent to me is not a successful therapy. But 1 per cent to some people is a chance.

HELEN DALLEY: Media overdrive each time a celebrity older mum gives birth just reinforces a misplaced perception that, hey, we can all do that.

DR GRAEME HUGHES, IVFAUSTRALIA: Cherie Blair became pregnant at the age of, I think, 46 and people were very encouraged. I was inundated with phone calls from older women thinking that maybe technology could help them get pregnant at the age of 46, 47, 48 and 49 and even older, but, of course, they were very disappointed when I was able to tell them what the real statistics were.

DR RIC PORTER: Don't you read in the *Women's Weekly* one article that takes up two pages of the women who is 45, 46 and has a baby. So everybody thinks everyone can do it. In fact, there aren't enough pages in the *Women's Weekly* to cover all those women who are trying to have babies or at least having sex at age 45 and not getting pregnant.

HELEN DALLEY: Deborah Thomas, the editor of the *Women's Weekly*, has experienced the full roller-coaster ride of conception. She admits she delayed trying to conceive so long.

DEBORAH THOMAS, EDITOR, *AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S WEEKLY*: My career was going well, travelling to exotic locations, lots of friends, lots of friends without children and we just had this very carefree, kind of, I guess, selfish life. As I say, it's classic baby boomer behaviour.

HELEN DALLEY: Then at 42, Deborah was surprised to find herself pregnant. But the worst happened - the baby was born almost 18 weeks premature and did not survive.

DEBORAH THOMAS: I probably consoled myself in some way of thinking that even though I didn't have a live baby, I had, for a moment, experienced the joy of anticipating a baby, the joy of being pregnant. I satisfied myself with it that I had known what it was like for a moment to just touch being pregnant and the joy of a new life. Oh God, I can't believe I'm still doing this, I'm sorry. Anyway.

HELEN DALLEY: You thought you missed your chance?

DEBORAH THOMAS: Yes.

HELEN DALLEY: In her grief, Deborah figured that was her first and last chance to have a baby, yet, three years later, she complained to her husband that she must be heading into menopause.

DEBORAH THOMAS: I feel exhausted, I feel shocking. This menopause is just the worst thing I'm going through. As it turned out, I was three months pregnant.

HELEN DALLEY: You had mistaken pregnancy for menopause?

DEBORAH THOMAS: Absolutely.

HELEN DALLEY: So at 45...

DEBORAH THOMAS: I fell pregnant.

HELEN DALLEY: Naturally.

DEBORAH THOMAS: Naturally.

HELEN DALLEY: No IVF?

DEBORAH THOMAS: No IVF.

HELEN DALLEY: The result was little Oscar, now aged two. He was born when his mum was 46 years old - a biological rarity.

DEBORAH THOMAS: I think it was like a 0.01 per cent chance of getting pregnant naturally at that age. I think was actually off the Richter scale.

HELEN DALLEY: We all read about your joy and your new baby through your column in the *Weekly*, but do you think women know that you are the exception, you are not the rule?

DEBORAH THOMAS: I know that what happened to me was unusual. What I try to tell women is that they need to be aware of the facts, they need to know how fertility decreases with age. I get women coming up to me on planes and in the streets saying, "Congratulations, you've given me hope." I caution them with, "That's what happened to me. I was extremely lucky."

HELEN DALLEY: Determined not to be disappointed, 42-year-old Terri Flynn hopes to be an IVF success story. She, too, had delayed child bearing to establish a career, but after her second marriage at age 35 to Paschal, Terri had difficulties getting pregnant.

TERRI FLYNN: I thought I had lots of time and I was busy living my life. I wasn't ready to have a child in my 20s. I was having far too good a time going out partying.

HELEN DALLEY: When did you think the biological clock might have run out, or did you not think about it?

TERRI FLYNN: No, I knew by about 40.

HELEN DALLEY: You thought you had till 40?

TERRI FLYNN: I thought I had up to 40 to conceive naturally. I thought after 40, there might be a few problems, about there's always IVF.

HELEN DALLEY: After two years of trying to conceive naturally, Terri was told she had blocked fallopian tubes, so she began IVF at age 38. She was told at her age, there was a 15 to 20 per cent success rate, which meant 80 per cent failed.

HELEN DALLEY: What did you think of those odds?

TERRI FLYNN: I thought I was going to be one of the 20 per cent that did conceive. I always thought I would conceive and, yes, there is a high failure rate, but that wouldn't be me, because I was fit and unhealthy. Perhaps that's for unhealthy people that their fertility declines. But I've realised what you present on the outside is not an indication of what's going on reproductively.

HELEN DALLEY: Terri has had so far 30 embryos implanted.

HELEN DALLEY: Thirty chances of maybe getting pregnant, only two ended up in pregnancy.

TERRI FLYNN: Yes.

HELEN DALLEY: And none have ended up in a baby?

TERRI FLYNN: Correct.

HELEN DALLEY: How does that take its toll?

TERRI FLYNN: Well, it's hard emotionally. It's hard doing IVF, walking the fine line between optimism and reality.

PASCHAL FLYNN: When it didn't happen after one trial, I was always very positive, so I'm still 100 per cent positive that it will happen. Yeah.

HELEN DALLEY: It's a difficult question to ask you, but how can you be so positive when you've had so many troughs?

PASCHAL FLYNN: Yeah, I guess the common denominator is Terri. In my eyes, she has excelled in everything in life. I just don't think she wouldn't.

HELEN DALLEY: For the men involved, IVF can be just as traumatic a journey. For them, it's almost a double burden - keeping in check their own baby hunger while being firmly supportive of their partner.

TIM OLSEN: Every time it doesn't work, you've virtually got to scrape yourself up off the floor, and maintain a support for your wife. They're all kinds of psychological aspects when it comes to, you know, wanting to be parents and thinking that, you know, it was always just going to happen, and it doesn't. I think it's a testament to our relationship we have been able to get through all this when other people don't make it through.

HELEN DALLEY: Art dealer Tim Olsen and his wife Dominic Ogilvie didn't meet until she was in her late 30s.

DOMINIC OGILVIE: My mother had three children by the time she was 22 and she had another one when she was in her early 30s. She had four children. She's beautiful, intelligent, capable. I sometimes looked at her and thought she had probably wasted her life. She has done a fantastic job at being a mother to us, but she would have been capable of doing so many other things. I think I looked at her and thought, "I don't want to be like that." I want to be free and be able to fly. The other thing they can have that we have told them, this is four inches longer.

HELEN DALLEY: Dominic built up her fashion agency business. Marrying at 38, she immediately started trying for a baby.

DOMINIQUE OGILVIE: We are brought up to think women go through menopause at 45, I thought I had few years up my sleeve. I didn't think it would be a problem at all.

HELEN DALLEY: For the last three years, they, too, have ridden the IVF roller-coaster with seven attempts, including four miscarriages, but crunch time for this couple came last year in their doctor's rooms.

DOMINIQUE OGILVIE: He said to me, basically, we've got six months to go. "If it hasn't worked by your 43rd birthday, we should call it a day." I suppose that was the most devastating news I had heard. I kept always thinking it would be work. I was always positive. I always got back on the horse and tried. You know, after a miscarriage, I thought, it will work next time. I was very positive. I thought, "Gee, we have one more shot." Out of the whole experience of the last four or five years, that was the most - that was the saddest time for me.

HELEN DALLEY: Sad, why?

DOMINIQUE OGILVIE: Because all of a sudden, you know, I had to face the prospect of really not having children.

HELEN DALLEY: But for Dominic and Tim, their last shot at it had a happy outcome.

DOMINIQUE OGILVIE: When I was 43 years of age, it proved to be successful, and I'm seven months pregnant, so it's fantastic.

TIM OLSEN: It is a roller-coaster when you have the early stage of pregnancy, when you are going through the difficult three months. Every day when you wake up and it's still there, it's like a gift.

HELEN DALLEY: At 42, Terri Flynn no longer has the option of using her own eggs.

TERRI FLYNN: My problem lies with my eggs. I'm 42 years old and they're past their use-by date.

HELEN DALLEY: Despite her IVF difficulties, Terri is now relying on the generosity of a younger woman, her close friend, Jane, to help her become a mother. Although she has never had a baby herself, Jane is willing to donate her eggs so Terri and Paschal can fulfil their dream of a longed-for child.

JANE: She has had a fair few failed attempts, so it was something I wanted to do for her.

HELEN DALLEY: Why?

JANE: Because I think it is a wonderful thing to do. It is a wonderful gift. She's a friend of mine, I love her dearly and I want to see her happy, and pregnant.

HELEN DALLEY: Because Jane is donating her genetic material to Terri, both women must undergo extensive counselling before proceeding.

DR GRAEME HUGHES: We've had a good discussion this morning with Jane. I want you to realise that once you have given up your eggs, you lose control of them. Up until that point you can stop, you can cancel, you can do anything like that. But once the eggs are fertilised with the sperm, then you've lost control, because they are then owned by Terri.

HELEN DALLEY: Will there be any tug to be a mother to this child?

JANE: No. As far as I'm concerned, my job is done, once I've gone through the procedure and the eggs are harvested. Terri is going to grow the baby, Terri will deliver the baby and Terri and Paschal will raise the child. If that child wants to know anything about me, fine. But as far as I'm concerned, my job is done, as soon as I have the procedure to harvest the eggs.

HELEN DALLEY: In Australia, egg donation is still relatively uncommon. While advertising for an altruistic egg donor is legal, buying or selling any body parts, including eggs, is not, thereby reducing the donor pool to close friends or family who are willing to go through the IVF mill for free. Compare that to the United States where egg donation has become like a stud farm business. Young fillies, many still in their late teens, finance their college education by selling their eggs for thousands of dollars to desperate women.

HELEN DALLEY: But for Terri, she feels fortunate to have found a willing donor.

TERRI FLYNN: The glass is half full again, and that's because of, well, my own optimism, but because Jane's on board with me this time in a partnership and she has got great eggs and she's young and fit and healthy and substantially younger than I am. So I'm feeling very optimistic.

HELEN DALLEY: It seems optimism is much-needed, as most women going through IVF find it emotionally and physically draining.

LEESA MELDRUM: The drugs alone - the injections are \$1500 and then any other additional drugs on top of that. It's a major deal, really - I mean ... it's 14 days of injections and drugs and then, you know, you have to go into hospital and have the eggs removed, and then you're sort of on tenterhooks because you don't know how many are going to take, you don't know how many embryos you're going to get. And then you find out you're not pregnant, then you're devastated and then you cry and have to tell your family, and then you have to, like me, sit in a dark room and think about what am I going to do next.

HELEN DALLEY: On top of such invasive treatments, is the considerable cost. While Medicare picks up the tab for many of the IVF procedures, out-of-pocket expenses can add up to thousands per attempt. Leesa Meldrum estimates she spent \$40,000 on IVF to date.

LEESA MELDRUM: I haven't had a life for so long now. I have to work to pay for IVF because it's so expensive, so I work and have IVF, work and have IVF.

HELEN DALLEY: For the next generation, what will the fertility relationship, work, children, jigsaw look like? Will women have babies younger as the fertility experts are urging?

EVA COX, FEMINIST: Why do we have to do one thing or another? I think it would be really good for women to feel that they can have babies in their 20s at the same time as they might pursue a bit of part-time work or finish off their studies or do something else at the same time. I think that's perfectly reasonable.

HELEN DALLEY: Some maintain that women won't contemplate having babies any earlier until there are at least changes in the workplace.

ANNE SUMMERS, FEMINIST WRITER: Why, on the one hand, we're complaining about a declining birth rate, on the other hand, we have in place policies that make it almost impossible for women to combine having children and having jobs. If we were really worried about our birth rate, you think we would make it as easy as possible for women to have babies, hang on to their jobs, have terrific, safe, affordable, reliable child care, and also the sorts of family tax policies that we currently have ought not to discriminate against working families, which is what they currently do.

HELEN DALLEY: But at least armed with the right facts on fertility, some young women interested one day in having children may heed the message.

JANE: It does put things into perspective a little bit, you know, not getting any - I hadn't given it much thought, but I'm not getting any younger, so it makes me think about my own fertility and planning to have kids at 36, 37, I might bring it forward a few years now.

LEESA MELDRUM: There's nothing worse than going to an infertility clinic and seeing women who can't have a child. It's a tragedy. It's one of our modern-day tragedies that people aren't seeing.

DEBORAH THOMAS: I don't really feel it is up to me to tell women what to do or what not to do. It is a joy. It is difficult to get pregnant over a certain age. The IVF doctors are saying this, you've got to listen and make some hard decisions and not just bounce through life thinking everything will be okay, and that's what life is really all about.

