

remember being incensed with my husband when we went to the Rotunda, for the embryos to be implanted in me on the second occasion. He dropped me and drove off to park, but took ages finding a space; my name was called twice and still he hadn't arrived. I was becoming increasingly agitated, convinced I was going to miss my turn and that my embryos wouldn't be implanted. Finally, he strolled in with a newspaper under his arm and -poor man -I was incandescent with him. It seemed to me that if he'd taken time to go in search of a newsagent, then he wasn't treating this most crucial final stage of the treatment with the urgency it deserved. Communication was splintering between us, but still we continued -the IVF whirligig seemed to have a momentum of its own.

After my third egg extraction I remember weeping inconsolably because "only" seven eggs had been harvested, instead of 10 as previously. To me, it was a sign that my fertility levels were plummeting, an unpromising augury for the outcome of that attempt. My husband was embarrassed by my tears outside the operating theatre and tried to hustle me away, which prompted additional feelings of resentment. I felt utterly alone. I don't suppose he understood quite how disturbed I was becoming and how the drugs, the daily hospital visit, the blood-taking and above all the strain of wishing for the near-impossible were taking their toll.

Men urgently need counselling if their partners undergo IVF. A man ought to be taken aside and have it spelled out to him that **a woman can be transformed by the treatment into a pre-menstrual, post-menopausal monster**. If he loves her and wants to support her through the ordeal, he will have to learn to bite his lip and accept that he'll be treading on eggshells around her.

I know it's difficult, because while women become I know it's difficult, because while women become completely blinkered, **men are sidelined by the IVF process. Couples need to take along, honest look at**

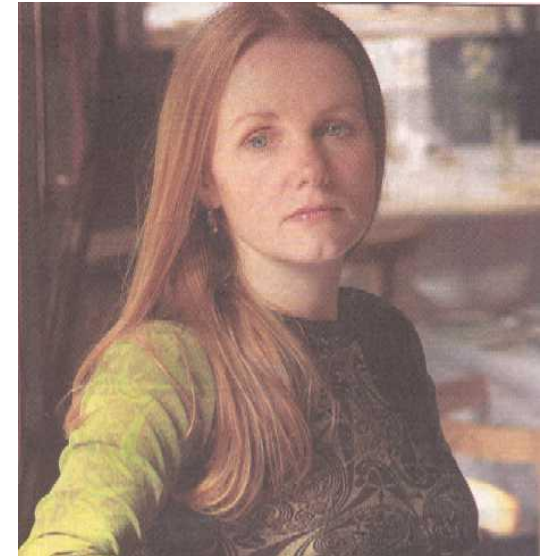
their relationship before considering IVF. If there are any cracks, fertility treatment has the potential to turn them into chasms. During this time, all my friends and relatives seemed to be getting pregnant. The phone would ring, an excited voice would say "guess what?", and I would feel as though a giant fist was slowly, inexorably squeezing my heart. I tried hard not to spoil their moments. I hope I didn't. I did my best to say all the congratulatory things -and then I locked myself in the bathroom and howled. The staff at the Rotunda were nurturing -I remember the kind faces of every nurse and doctor who treated me -and they tried to manage my expectations, but I didn't want to listen. I was incapable of it. For some people, the urge to reproduce becomes a driving compulsion which consumes their life, and I was one of those women. It's overpowering, a force of nature. If someone had offered me a pact and said I'd lose my husband, my home, my health and my career, but I'd hold a baby of my own in my arms, I'd have said fine, show me where to sign up. My husband and I split up almost immediately after the third failed attempt. I had neither the courage nor the capacity for a fourth try -I believed it would harm me to go on, that if the physical ordeal didn't kill me, the emotional fall-out would push me over the edge. That's when I was at my lowest ebb in life: childless, homeless, loveless.

What persuaded me was a growing unease with the way fertility treatment is perceived as the great panacea, the magical remedy that will solve every problem. Yet it doesn't matter how much money or effort or emotional investment you make in it, how much angst you go through or how desperately you want a baby, it's still a lottery. It works for some women, I'm glad to say, but they're in the minority.**Most of us fail with IVF**

Ravaged by "Baby Hunger" by Martina Devlin

Extract from The Irish Times

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On the 25th July 1978, Louise Brown made medical history as the first test-tube baby.

Now in-vitro fertilisation is seen as a panacea for couples denied a baby by nature. But, as author **Martina Devlin** found out, the treatment is gruelling and can leave deep emotional scars.

www.fertilitycare.net

Ravaged by "Baby Hunger"

I call them my "baby hunger" years, as though in naming them I can draw out their sting. Of course I can't, because the pain of infertility never retreats, although it becomes more manageable in time. Not so manageable, however, that it can ever be eradicated. I spent two years having fertility treatment in an attempt to give birth - years I look back on now and marvel how I ever survived them.

My three failed attempts at in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) laid waste my life. I lost my husband, my home and my dreams of becoming a mother, and the combination of those three concurrent blows took me to the verge of a nervous breakdown. In the raw desolation of the aftermath, I saw no purpose in life if I couldn't hold a baby in my arms. Natural selection had intervened to deselect me, so there must be something wrong with my genes. I felt flawed, a sub-standard woman, and for a period I wanted to crawl into a dark corner and be left alone to die.

But I survived, because grief alone doesn't kill people, and today I'm still trying to make sense of that savage time when a torrent of emotions possessed me: pain, incomprehension, rage and, above all, heartache -the wrenching bereavement of childlessness. My story started on a positive note. I was married, and my husband and I were keen to start a family immediately; we moved to Dublin from London because we thought our children would have a better life here, bought a four-bedroom house to fill with babies -and waited. And waited. Finally we sought medical advice.

Tests showed that my fallopian tubes were so warped and twisted that I was unlikely to conceive although shocked, we were optimistic, after a referral to the fertility unit at the Rotunda Hospital, that modern medicine might solve our problems. There, I was told I had **a one-in-three chance of success with IVF**. Experts now estimate that, the chances are between **one in four and one in five**, but I was relatively young and healthy, a non-smoker, with no history of infertility in the family. We handed over our money in the blind expectation that a baby was the inevitable corollary. It was only going to be a matter of time. That one-in-three statistic only applied to other women, I believed -and naturally I was going to be one of the lucky ones. You don't hear the word "chance", you hear the word "pregnancy". However, **I was hopelessly unprepared for the reality of what IVF treatment involves, for the way it invades your life and colours your relationship with your partner, as well as eroding your sense of self-worth.** I was pumped full of drugs to suppress my menstrual cycle and send me into a fake menopause. Then my system was flooded with a barrage of different drugs to stimulate my ovaries into overdrive - they swelled up to the size of small oranges and became ultra-sensitive. Instead of producing one egg, as is normal in the menstrual cycle, I produced up to 10. These were extracted under anaesthetic and fertilised with my partner's sperm. In each of my three IVF attempts, three embryos were returned to my womb. Then it was a case of going away, resting and hoping for the best. I hoped, God knows I hoped, but **on each attempt I miscarried all three embryos after a few weeks.** They were pinpricks of life but **they were my babies and I was devastated.** I had chosen their names and bought drawers full of clothes for them.

I had a christening robe I used to take out and stroke, godparents chosen and first birthday parties planned. I would talk to my babies in the womb, urging them to cling on to life, reassuring them, bathing them in love, promising that if they could get over this first hurdle of implanting successfully inside me we'd all have a wonderful life together. It wasn't meant to be and my bewilderment at this first failure was all encompassing. But I couldn't grieve at home for long - I had to go back to work as a journalist and help earn the money to finance another IVF session. Words cannot adequately describe the intensity of my longing to hear a child call me that most under-valued of words, "Mammy". Already at this stage the pressure was starting to shake our marriage, but still we pressed on. I was a woman driven, my desire to reproduce was overwhelming and the consequences were irrelevant. Anyway, I was convinced that everything would be set to rights by the birth of a baby. Self-deluding? Possibly, but that's part of the primal instinct. I was caught tight in the grip of a biological imperative over which I had no control. I believe now, with the benefit of that fool's wisdom, hindsight, that my husband and I needed counselling at every stage of the process. There was one brief session before we were allowed to proceed to our second attempt, but I found it perfunctory. **IVF has a huge psychological and physical impact.** I was awash with hormones as a result of the cocktail of drugs I had been given and they played havoc with everything from my sleeping pattern to my emotions. I burst into tears at the drop of a hat and I felt incredibly distressed by trivial incidents.