



Behind a black painted door, four floors up a high white stucco building in Harley Street, sits a tiny Chinese woman looking touched more by the hand of Bond Street than Beijing. She wears a pastel bouclé suit and a miniature pair of court shoes – the kind of look favoured by ladies-who-lunch. Her face is perfectly made up and her coiffure is high and sculpted. She is dwarfed by her leather-topped desk, empty save for a pile of brown files, each one bearing a woman's name.

A bed runs along one wall, over which hangs a large case containing a collage of photographs of new-born infants, some captured in the first hours of life, gazing inquisitively into the camera, others huddled in the arms of their adoring parents. It is the first clue of the nature of Dr Xiao-Ping Zhai's practice. The second is the way her female patients enter and exit the building, discreetly avoiding each other's eyes or occasionally exchanging an empathetic look that requires no elaboration but translates as: 'You too? I know how you feel.'

Last month the Government announced that it is finally to make fertility treatment widely available on the NHS – ending the postcode lottery, which gave some women free treatment and others none. But the provision is limited to one cycle only, despite recommendations from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence that three attempts are needed for the best chance of success. While physicians, ethical bodies and government officials will no doubt carry on debating in cold, clinical detail the issues surrounding a woman's right to have a child, 44,000 desperate couples a year will continue to seek help, and 24,000 will end up resorting to invasive cycles of IVF, be it at their own or the

She arrived in Britain in 1989 with the aim of setting up her own TCM practice and convincing female patients that infertility could be cured without the use of heavy drugs and invasive investigations. 'When I first arrived and told a Chinese colleague my intentions, he said immediately, "Don't do it!" Britain, he said, was a country where IVF was in the bones and that nobody would take me seriously. But then I met another consultant who said, "What rubbish! Britain has such a low IVF success rate." It was then I began doing my own research and saw how poor the success rate was and how little was on offer beyond IVF.'

It took Zhai seven years to get going, but finally, in 1996, after delivering a talk at the National Fertility Association, her plan began to take off: 'Only four or five women came to my seminar group compared with 50 or 60 crammed into the talks about IVF, but one interested patient reported back to the association that my talk had been wonderful, and they then printed up my notes in their magazine. It went from there.'

Dr Zhai's results, illustrated in her brochure with impressive-looking pie and bar charts, are extraordinary. The fertility clinic at the very top of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority league table (2000) claims a success rate of up to 38.8 per cent. Zhai's figures, on the other hand, are in the seventies. Between 1995 and 2000, for example, she treated 224 patients (average age 37, average Western treatment per woman 3.5) for at least six months. Of these, 76 per cent became pregnant, and 77 per cent of those pregnancies resulted in a baby. Of the 23 per cent who miscarried, 69 per cent went on to have a baby. Fifty-two of these 224

Fertile imagination

When IVF fails for childless couples, despair can set in. But Dr Xiao-Ping Zhai has helped hundreds of 'infertile' women to conceive with the help of traditional Chinese medicine, and now her approach is being studied by forward-thinking Western doctors. By Louise Carpenter. Photograph by Peter Marlow

taxpayer's expense, in the hope that they might end up with what millions of others take for granted.

Only those who have been told they cannot have a child know the visceral nature of the suffering. They will tell you how their lives changed overnight, how they entered a world of clinics and statistics, often receiving one diagnosis after another, sometimes wildly contradictory, causing violent shifts between hope and despair. They spend many thousands of pounds on treatment, sometimes re-mortgaging their homes, until, finally, they are told to give up and consider adoption or egg donation.

This is where Dr Zhai comes into the picture. Like many Chinese doctors on Harley Street, she practises traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) – the use of acupuncture and Chinese herbs – but whereas her colleagues have built a reputation for curing conditions such as skin allergies, Dr Zhai specialises in infertility. To Zhai's patients, she is something of a miraculous baby-maker, providing hope, and more often than not, a child, when all else has failed. What makes Zhai even more unusual is that before she switched to TCM, she qualified in Western medicine and spent five years as a paediatrician in a Western hospital in Guangzhou.

patients became pregnant without assisted fertility.

There is no doubt that witnessing a Zhai consultation (£120) adds to the air of mystery surrounding her success. She examines the tongue, the pulse on each wrist and asks lifestyle questions ranging from sleep patterns and dreaming through to bowel movements and urination. Patients will then be asked to make adjustments to their diets depending on what she sees – no wheat and dairy products, for instance. Roughly two days later, a package will arrive full of individually wrapped herbs resembling bits of old moss and twigs. These are the Chinese herbs, made up to prescription – such as 'Motherwort' (adjusts menstruation by invigorating 'Qi') or 'Glossy privet fruit' (nourishing the kidney and liver) – which must be brewed into tea and drunk twice daily. They cost on average £200 a month. Every woman will be told to monitor her menstrual cycle through a temperature chart and return every two weeks for a check-up and acupuncture (£80). Treatment can last anything from three months to two years, sometimes longer. 'No pregnancy' is not regarded by Dr Zhai as 'no improvement', for all the while a woman continues with the treatment, her general health and reproductive system will improve, making conception

Dr Xiao-Ping Zhai in her office. 'It only takes one thing to be wrong in the body and it throws the whole system out'



more likely. (Dr Zhai cites the case of a 46-year-old patient who conceived after two years of TCM.) Ultimately, however, women who fail to get pregnant through TCM are advised to combine it with assisted fertility treatment.

All this follows the principles of TCM, which works by regulating the vital energy or 'Qi' that flows through the body. According to this ancient practice, good health and metabolism depend on the 'vital energy'. As it flows, it provides warmth and distributes body fluids. Each organ has its own pattern of Qi and each organ is represented on the tongue, which presents Zhai with a kind of weather chart of health. If one organ is not functioning properly, it affects the rest of the body. 'It only takes one thing to be wrong to throw the whole system out,' she explains.

Gayle Hall is a face behind one of Zhai's statistics. She gazes at her three children in amazement: 'I pinch myself, I really do. If you had told my husband and me that one day we would have a family, I would have laughed in your face.' Hall was diagnosed with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (a condition that affects ovulation) in her twenties and after seven fertility treatments, including two cycles of IVF and one high-tech ICSI (where one sperm is injected directly into the egg), she was told to give up. She was 35. 'I had become completely obsessive. I was emotional, irrational, I couldn't be around babies or pregnant people. My life was utterly devastated,' she remembers. She went to Zhai as a last resort. 'I didn't have a clue what she was doing to me, but I drank the horrible herbal tea and had the acupuncture because I had nothing to lose. Slowly she regulated my menstrual cycle. Within three months I was pregnant.'

Nine months after her son was born, Hall returned to Zhai. 'Within three months I was pregnant again,' she says. Her second baby was born in June 2001. Three months later, out of the blue, she found herself pregnant again, this time with no help from Zhai: 'What Dr Zhai does is a very difficult thing to have faith in because it is completely mysterious. But I don't care that I don't understand it. I tell everybody about her and so does my family.'

Sarah Jackson (not her real name) is a New York businesswoman living in London. After six months of trying to get pregnant, at the age of 37 she and her English husband consulted a fertility expert who diagnosed a disastrously low sperm count. From there, they entered into a twilight zone of tests and IVF cycles. Her husband's sperm count was later shown to be fine (he'd had flu at the time). She went through IVF without having her tubes checked, only to be told later they were blocked. One expert said egg donation was the way forward, another that she would need corrective surgery. She ended up at Dr Zhai's door. 'The fertility experts convinced me that there was no chance. I remember screaming hysterically, "Why did I leave it so late?" It was the worst and best day of my life because in my despair I found Dr Zhai's clinic.' Jackson quickly became pregnant, and is now, at 40 years old, expecting her second child. 'Dr Zhai understands this element of fertility that other people just don't seem to. For her it's an art, not a science. She suspected I was pregnant before I even knew.'

Many Western fertility experts remain sceptical about complementary medicine, largely because it is unregulated. A recent House of Lords report and the Government's response made it clear that the first step must be to find out whether the treatments

themselves work. It has now been recommended that the Department of Health fund research on all aspects of complementary medicine. No doubt as a result of her Western training, Dr Zhai agrees with the need for more research, and has already started building bridges with conventional fertility experts.

Michael Dooley is a consultant gynaecologist and fertility expert based at the Lister Hospital in London, and at the Winterbourne Hospital in Dorset. (He also works for the NHS and is about to publish a book, *Your Change, Your Choice*, an analysis of how to manage the menopause, to be followed up with a second book, *Your Infertility, Your Choice*.) In June, he will open an integrated clinic in Dorset where he will implement a programme called Fit for Fertility, aimed at giving women with fertility problems a complete 'package of care'. He is among a handful of London gynaecologists who refer patients to Dr Zhai while continuing to treat or monitor them through a Western approach. 'I began to realise that 65 to 70 per cent of my patients were seeking complementary medicine without telling me, presumably because they thought I wouldn't approve. It saddened me,' Dooley says.

The inclination to look beyond Western medicine for treatments is confirmed by Clare Brown, the chief executive of Infertility Network UK. 'Complementary medicine is becoming more and more popular,' she says. 'A lot of our members are interested in pursuing it, and as a result, we have started embracing it in our meetings. Our second National Infertility Day, on June 12, will include sessions on complementary approaches.'

But before desperate women eschew Western medicine entirely, convinced a spot of reflexology or massage will solve the problems, Dr Dooley

advises caution. 'It is vital to get a Western diagnosis and establish any medical problems. A fertility expert like me should never allow unnecessary delay in treatment. However, I passionately believe that to get the best out of somebody you must have a team approach and that in many cases there is no need to rush into IVF. As a consultant, one has to be open-minded even about things one doesn't necessarily understand. Dr Zhai is an incredibly compassionate and understanding doctor and her results are very, very good.'

For Dr Zhai's part, she says of Mr Dooley, 'He is a superb communicator. We are constantly on the phone discussing our patients. I will always stress to a patient the importance of a consultant like Mr Dooley. If a woman has endometriosis, I need to know about it and I will never promise success when I am doubtful. But some fertility experts encourage women into treatments when their bodies are not yet healthy enough to go through the process. I see it sometimes in some patients who, despite seeing me are still intent on going ahead with IVF cycles, even though I tell them to wait – the cycle is always unsuccessful'.

Zhai and Dooley intend to write a research paper together in an attempt to widen understanding of the benefits of merging East and West. (Even the Queen seems to agree, having recently changed to a GP who offers a range of alternative treatments, including Chinese medicine.) A recent article, 'Application of traditional Chinese medicine in the treatment of infertility', published in *Human Fertility*, the British Fertility Society journal, has already gone some way to highlight the benefits of an enlightened approach to infertility. 'Although the claims which are sometimes made for herbal prod-

ucts may never be verified,' its authors wrote, they went on to predict successful examples of Chinese remedies working to improve fertility on their own or alongside Western procedures such as IVF.

'My dream is that one day I can provide what I do on the NHS,' says Zhai. Dooley adds, 'For now, I would much rather my patients spent money, in the first instance, on Dr Zhai or yoga than rushing into IVF when it might be avoided.'

Georgina Spencer (not her real name) is a good example of the union working at its best. At 32 and after a year of haphazardly trying to conceive, she decided to have a check-up at a London clinic. Blood tests revealed she was perimenopausal, the physical state (sometimes lasting 10 years) preced-

'I drank the horrible tea and had the acupuncture because I had nothing to lose. In three months I was pregnant'

ing menopause itself. She was told she needed assisted conception, probably within the next two or three months before her fertility fell even further. 'I was devastated. I was so young,' she says. 'My life became like some kind of horror story. I couldn't quite believe it at first.' She researched the subject and approached Dooley: 'His clinic was achieving some of the best IVF results in the country. He did the tests and confirmed I had a very low egg supply, that my chances of natural conception were very poor and that he did not want to leave it much more than six months before trying an IVF cycle. I was lucky he was even willing to try. I still vividly remember, however, my boyfriend and me break-

ing down in his consulting room when he advised putting our name on a donor-egg waiting list and thinking about adoption. He was very honest with us, but in the same breath he told us he wanted us to see Dr Zhai, and that she might help prepare my body for the IVF experience to come.'

An IVF cycle was pencilled in for four months later, in July. In the meantime Spencer began seeing Dr Zhai, who recalls, 'She was overworked, her system was damp and heavy from her lifestyle – drinking, spicy foods and late nights – but basically she was fit and young and I knew her reproductive system would recover.'

Zhai was so convinced that she persuaded Dooley to postpone the IVF cycle until October to give her more time to get Spencer ready for the treatment, something Dooley supported. 'These conversations were happening about me, and I found that incredibly reassuring,' Spencer remembers. 'It was as if I had the best of both worlds. Both doctors seemed to care so passionately about giving us the child we so desperately wanted.'

In the third month, when Spencer's hormone levels (monitored carefully by Dooley) indicated plummeting fertility, she discovered she was pregnant. 'When the day of my proposed IVF cycle finally arrived,' Spencer says, 'it was still marked in my diary. I cannot articulate the feeling of joy I had knowing not only was I pregnant already, but also that we'd managed it without all the drugs and heartache.'

Dooley shakes his head in amazement. 'You have to listen to as many voices as possible when treating infertility, and although I don't understand exactly how TCM works, I am going out of my way to embrace and understand it.'

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