



TCM: A case study

'In November 96, having tried unsuccessfully for some time to conceive, we were told that it would be "a miracle", owing to my husband having a very low sperm count. This conclusion to our fertility tests meant nothing to me and I just assumed there would be a straightforward cure, but this was not the case and ICSI was to be our only hope. We immediately had our names placed on the NHS waiting list and so the waiting began.

'Knowing next to nothing about infertility, I sought all the information I could through libraries and bookshops. The literature I found seemed very simplistic. I then discovered *ISSUE* and *CHILD* and on becoming members of both organisations we were able to begin to understand our situation.

'Owing to the long NHS wait ahead of us, we decided to pay privately for our first ICSI treatment. The two weeks following the embryo replacement seemed like a lifetime. The day of the pregnancy blood test arrived - but so did my period, along with an emotional crash. I had been so strong, but my reaction to the ICSI failure shocked me and my fear of any future treatments took a firm hold.

'Surely there had to be a more natural solution, one less invasive. I remembered having seen an advertisement in an old issue of *Childchat* magazine placed by author Nicky Wesson, who was doing research for a book on alternative methods of treating infertility. On telephoning Nicky, I discovered that her book *Alternative Infertility Treatments* was only weeks away from being published, and she was glad to tell me that her research had discovered that Traditional Chinese Medicine had come out top when it came to increasing sperm counts.

'I contacted *ISSUE* to get more information about this. I presented the facts and figures to my husband who agreed to undergo some treatment, initially for a period of at least 120 days (the approximate life cycle of a sperm). Despite some apprehension, we went along to our first appointment at the Zhai Clinic in July 97.

'My husband Gary came home with brown paper

bags of seeds, leaves and flowers which had to be boiled and simmered for two-and-a-half hours every day. The treatment involved drinking two mugs of the subsequent concoction each day. The tea smelled and tasted like nothing else on earth, but nibbling at fruit between each sip helped the medicine go down.

'At each consultation, Dr Zhai asked Gary numerous health-related questions, took his pulse and looked at his tongue. Each time he would come home with more brown paper bags and varying medicinal mixtures. Tablets were prescribed for the four days when work took Gary away from home.

'Sperm tests were done at four to six-week intervals and each time there was a gradual increase in sperm count. 120 days lapsed and there was no mention of halting the treatment; we continued to boil and simmer the tea. In December 97 the test result had risen to 20 million per ml, but with poor motility. This result was like winning the lottery! The previous two years we had seen test results showing either zero sperm or a very low sperm count - 20 million was a great Christmas gift. Dr Zhai decided to change the combination of herbs and concentrate on the motility. January's sperm count fell somewhat, but the motility had increased considerably. Dr Zhai recommended that I start a daily temperature chart to monitor my ovulation pattern and the Chinese tea-making continued.

'On Valentine's Day the paperwork arrived for our one NHS-funded ICSI treatment. I dreaded having to go through the emotional turmoil again, but I couldn't let Gary down.

We were due to go on our annual skiing holiday on 17 February, and the day before was set aside for packing. A friend called to ask about the ICSI and I pointed out that the necessary blood tests would have to be done during my next cycle, since my period was due to start while I was on holiday. My period was already nine days late, but not for one moment did I consider the possibility that I might be pregnant. My friend insisted that I call round and buy a home-testing kit en route. I did the test - and, much to my amazement, it was positive. I telephoned Gary at work and he was totally stunned - and then the excitement set in.

'We went on holiday and I took the decision not to ski or do anything to risk the pregnancy - a decision partly made for me by the morning sickness that took a hold. At fifteen weeks I went back to Dr Zhai - but this time it was my turn. My sickness was at its worst, particularly in late afternoons and evenings. One session of Chinese acupuncture chased the sickness away.

'Despite people's scepticism, Gary and I are true believers in TCM and would undergo the treatment again if necessary. As I write this, I am in my nineteenth week of pregnancy and looking forward to my twenty-week scan. I still can't believe that we are expecting our first child - and will never forget the hurt and despair of suffering from infertility.'

Bea