



Dear ISSUE



Today is an extraordinary day for me. Some five years ago I was told by doctors at the Royal Free Hospital in London that I would never father children. I was also told that various manipulation techniques and other remedies were little short of a waste of money. Now I am the father of one daughter using the ICSI method at the Lister Hospital in Chelsea - and today, after twelve weeks of pregnancy, I saw the first scan of my partner's second pregnancy.

The second pregnancy is wholly due to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which we thought would help my sperm count - we never dreamed it would lead to this conclusion!

I married in 1989. After a year of trying to have a baby we went to the GP for advice and as a result I went for a series of sperm counts. This was the quickest way to eliminate the male partner. A series of sperm samples delivered to the RFH by car in the early morning through the rush hour are more Pythonesque than I care to remember... The results of the various counts were 2-3 million per sample. A biopsy was suggested and the result of this was that there was 'some sperm formation but with a decreased degree of maturation'. There followed a course of the steroid drug Mesterolone. The drug did little for my temper - and little for my sperm count. At this point the RFH said it could help me no further and advised against private clinics or other medical remedies. Indeed one particular doctor recommended 'a large bottle of whiskey'!

Many ISSUE members will know the feeling of despair which hit me then. Feelings of 'What is my future?' and 'Where am I going?', as though children are the rudder to our lives. Then there are the better days, when thoughts of money saved on children's clothes, books and schools are transformed into fantastic trips around the world ... idyllic island beaches far from the cry of children...peace and quiet...

My marriage broke up.

My new partner - the mother of our children - was interested in why my sperm count was low. I smoked, but not heavily, and I drank, but not excessively, and I thought I was reasonably healthy. A book was bought on the subject of infertility which mentioned a whole range of possibilities, and also suggested that we refer to ISSUE for more information.

So we did. After a couple of weeks various pamphlets and our copy of *iSSUE* magazine arrived. We read it all. We were intrigued in particular by the new technique which had now passed beyond being experimental - some weeks later came the next magazine, and a profile of the ICSI treatment at one of the London centres. The feature mentioned the Lister Hospital. We booked an appointment.

The relaxed and confident atmosphere at the Lister helped calm our nerves. Another sperm count was requested - surprisingly, it had improved to 5 million. Maybe ICSI was more than just a dream. But we soon discovered that one result is no indication of the future - three months later, on the threshold of starting the treatment, the count had fallen back to 1 million. Though they do say you need only one sperm to fertilise an egg - you have to hope it's a good one.

I had earlier stopped smoking and reduced drinking. Now I cut back to a Guinness a day and intensified the course of reflexology I'd been taking with Tessa Bilder in East Finchley - I continued this all the way through to the end of the ICSI programme. It must have worked, because we were successful with our very first attempt.

Not quite a year after Eleanor was born Rebecca and I decided to try again. We agreed to follow the ICSI programme once more - the difference this time was that I decided to try a course of Chinese Herbal Medicine with the Zhai Natural Remedies Clinic in West London - I'd read about this in *iSSUE* in Spring 96. Dr Zhai was positive and without any hesitation set to work. Yes, my sperm production could be improved - and natural medicine would treat the cause, not just the symptoms.

I never found out exactly what ingredients the medicine contained, but my sperm count went from being very low to 26 million in only four months. And in November Rebecca discovered she was pregnant! An entirely natural conception.

Obviously I am a total convert to TCM and I cannot recommend Dr Zhai too highly. Conventional drug-based medicine treats symptoms without trying to balance the body - the holistic approach is so much better. Yes, ICSI does work - and so does TCM. No one knows the long-term effect of either treatment but I know that through TCM neither my partner nor myself felt out of chemical control.

I know that I would have lacked the strength to keep on trying without any positive results. I also know how very lucky I am. I do hope this story is of help and reassurance to other men who are in my previous position.

Simon

Making Sense of your Semen Analysis

Have you looked in bafflement at your semen analysis and wondered what on earth all the numbers and terms actually mean? If the answer is yes, then the following simple guide may be of help:

Semen Volume - this is measured in millilitres.

Sperm Density - this is usually described in terms of the number per million sperm per millilitre of semen.

Sperm Velocity - measures the speed of the sperm movement. Sluggish velocity is suggestive of restricted fertility as sperm require a minimum velocity to enable them to penetrate the cervical mucus.

Motility - usually expressed as the percentage of sperm that are seen to be active. The motility is also graded as types I-IV, which refers to the type of swimming action exhibited by the sperm. The classes of motility types are as follows:

Type I: will penetrate the cervix but is unlikely to fertilise the egg

Type II: will penetrate the cervix and has a good chance of fertilising the egg

Type III: swims forward but cannot penetrate the cervix due to excessive lateral head motion

Type IV: no progressive motility.

Progression/Activity - a measure of the quality of sperm movement, primarily the speed of forward movement. This may be graded (the World Health Organisation recommends grading from 0-4, 0 being active but with no forward movement, 3 being normal forward movement and 4 being exceptionally progressive).

Morphology - the number of sperm that are abnormally shaped are counted and expressed as a percentage. Abnormal forms of less than 70% are within the normal range.

Antisperm Antibodies - a simple test may also be carried out to test for the presence of antisperm antibodies in the semen. These antibodies may cause sperm to clump together and thus affect their ability to reach and fertilise an egg.

Number Of Optimal Sperm - this figure gives an indication of the total number of sperm in an ejaculate which are normal in form, can pass through the cervix and are likely to be able to fertilise the egg. This figure is calculated as follows:

Count x Normal Forms (%) x Type II Motility (%) = Number of Optimal Sperm

If the number of optimal sperm is greater than 4.5 million with moderate or active velocity this is suggestive of normal fertility.

If the number of optimal sperm is less than 1 million this is suggestive of very restricted fertility.

The number of optimal sperm is effectively zero if the sperm velocity is sluggish.

Many thanks to *ISSUE's Swindon Fertility Support Group* for permission to reproduce this information.