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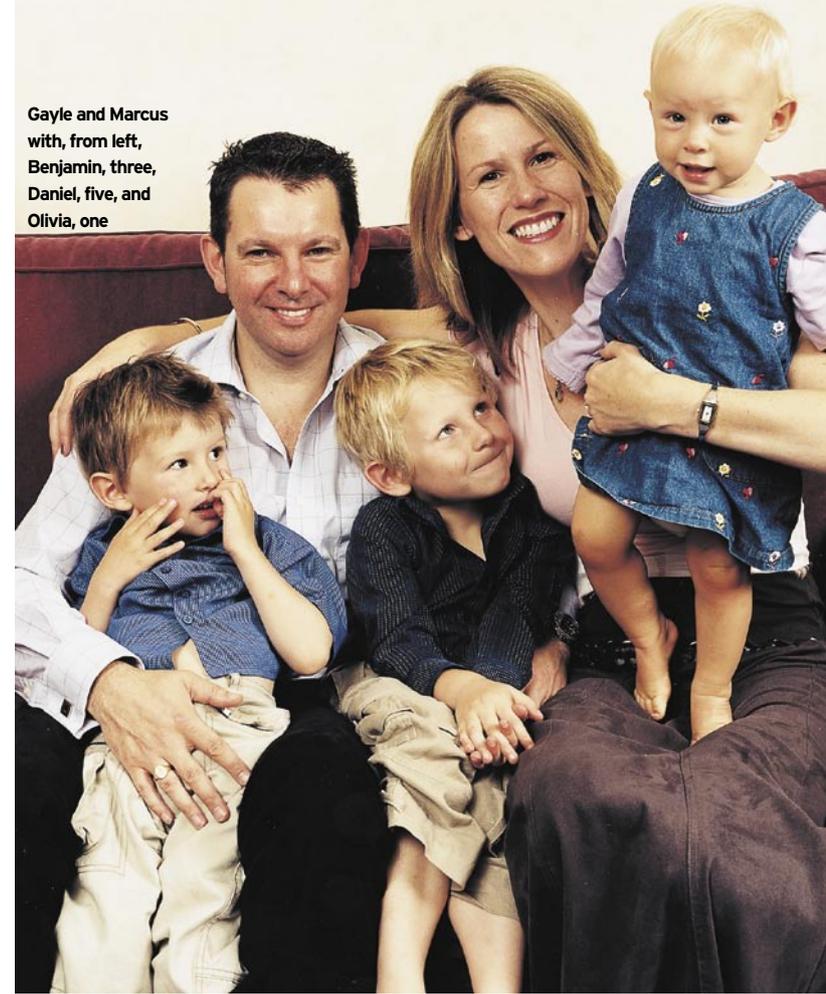
There can be few more devastating blows to the happiness of a couple who dream of having children to be told: 'It's just never going to happen.' Which is the diagnosis that Gayle Hall, 40, was given by her fertility expert six years ago, after her latest attempt at treatment had failed. 'It was awful. Brutal. Although at the same time I admired his honesty in telling us not to waste any more money on treatment.' Yet here we are, sitting in Gayle's toy-filled lounge in Maidenhead, Berkshire, with two small boys and a baby girl. Because – like an increasing number of 'infertile' couples (who tend to take the we'll-try-anything route rather than abandon all hope) – Gayle and her husband Marcus overcame their conception problems with the help of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

The Halls' story is no fluke. Research data from the Zhai Clinic in London's Harley Street – founded by Dr Xiao-Ping Zhai, who is qualified in both TCM and Western medicine, and who set up her specialist gynaecology clinic in 1993 – shows that between 1995 and 2000, 76 per cent of the women who underwent treatment for at least six months went on to become pregnant (and more than three quarters of those went on to have a baby). The average age of these new mothers was 37. Like Gayle, many couples turned to TCM as a 'last resort' – although an increasing number, reports Dr Zhai, are turning to her methods to enhance their fertility first, rather than embark on the hope-and-heartbreak hormonal roller coaster of IVF.

Gayle's own story began in 1993, when she married Marcus, a marketing director. 'We tried for a year – and nothing happened. So my GP referred me to a consultant who prescribed the fertility drug Clomid. When that didn't work, I had a laparoscopy, which resulted in a diagnosis of polycystic ovaries. Over the next few years, the Halls embarked on a programme of different fertility treatments at the Princess Margaret Hospital in Windsor and London's Hammersmith Hospital: IUI (intrauterine insemination), then IVF, then ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection). Eventually, after several attempts failed, her consultant gave that damning prognosis about Gayle's chances of ever conceiving. The whole process had been hugely stressful – 'although for me, it was very important to feel like I was doing something, so for as long as I was having treatment, I was hopeful'. Family and close friends knew of the couple's struggle – but not her colleagues at the office (Gayle works part time in human resources). 'I do remember one barbecue where I looked around and it seemed as if every couple had a baby except us. I burst into tears and had to leave. I don't know if it's the hormones, but when you're trying for a baby, you become totally obsessed with it. It's also physically and emotionally draining. I'd always wanted children – and motherhood was never something I contemplated not experiencing. I didn't really give up hope until the doctor told me that I wasn't going to get pregnant.'

Still desperate for a family, the Halls wrestled with the idea of adoption. Then, while leafing through the newspapers one day, Marcus stumbled across a small item about Dr Zhai's new clinic – at the time based in Chiswick, West London, and the only one of its kind in the UK to focus exclusively on gynaecological health. 'We thought: "What have we got to lose?"' Once again, Gayle remembers, it took away some of the stress to be doing something – although at the same time, Gayle admits to having been very cynical about TCM's potential to help. And she was a little ➤

Gayle and Marcus with, from left, Benjamin, three, Daniel, five, and Olivia, one



HOW CHINESE HERBS HELPED ME TO CONCEIVE

After several years of failed fertility treatment, Gayle Hall was told that she would never get pregnant. So, as a last resort, she turned to traditional Chinese medicine

Report **Josephine Fairley** Photographs **Becky Nixon**

◀ nervous, too: 'I'd read some stories in the press about possible liver damage from Chinese medicine but, on balance, we felt it was worth trying.'

A TCM consultation is unlike anything you'll encounter in the NHS. Rather than listen to a patient's heartbeat, the doctor places his or her hands on several different pulse points on the wrist, which reveal how the energy is flowing in the body. 'And I had to stick out my tongue for Dr Zhai to look at!' laughs Gayle (who'd endured several years of internal gynaecological examinations, but had never been asked to show her tongue to her infertility consultant). Noting down Gayle's medical history, Dr Zhai's diagnosis was that the energy flow to Gayle's ovaries was weak.

Rather than drugs or pills, Gayle was prescribed a herbal tea, to be drunk – but decidedly not enjoyed – twice a day. 'It looked like something that came out of the garden and tasted utterly vile,' remembers Gayle, wrinkling her nose at the memory. For a couple of months, though, she stuck to it – returning to Dr Zhai every few weeks for a check-up, at which the tea recipe might be subtly altered. Acupuncture was also given at these sessions. 'I began to worry because we had a holiday booked to visit my brother in India,' says Gayle, 'and I didn't think it would be practical to be boiling up vats of tea while we were travelling. Besides, nothing seemed to be working – so I asked Dr Zhai if there was anything stronger that she could prescribe.' Dr Zhai told Gayle that there were, indeed, pills she could take – but it was vital that she did a pregnancy test before taking them, 'just in case'.

With irregular periods – Gayle's cycle was sometimes 75 days – she couldn't tell. So an hour before the taxi was due to whisk Gayle and Marcus to the airport, she did just that. 'And I couldn't believe it: the test was positive!' By then, there were just 40 minutes to departure – time a shell-shocked Gayle spent calling her doctor to check that the vaccinations she'd had weren't going to damage the baby, and establishing whether or not to take malaria pills (in the end she decided not to – 'and spent the whole holiday worrying about whether I'd get malaria'). After spending a 12-hour flight flashing cat-that-got-the-cream grins at each other, things deteriorated into what Gayle describes as 'our worst holiday ever. I really suffered in the heat, was very sick and, newly pregnant, was super-sensitive to India's smells. I couldn't wait to get back.' But no harm was done and, after a smooth pregnancy, Daniel was born in 1999.

The couple would, smiles Gayle, 'happily have settled for one baby'. But a year later, they began to think it might be nice to give Daniel a brother or sister. So off Gayle went to see Dr Zhai – and within three months (and after more foul-tasting tea), Gayle conceived again. Benjamin was born in 2001. And then came the ultimate surprise: a year later, believing their family to be complete, Gayle found that she'd conceived again, with absolutely no help from Dr Zhai and her herbal brews. 'We couldn't believe it. But Dr Zhai explained that my system had been balanced by the treatment and was now functioning well on its own.' Olivia made her debut last autumn. It still feels, Gayle grins, 'like a miracle. I don't think I'll ever understand exactly how TCM works – and why it worked when our conventional treatment had failed – but I'm just so glad that we didn't give up hope.' ■

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TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE AND INFERTILITY

● Rather than simply unblock tubes or treat hormonal imbalances with yet more hormones, traditional Chinese medicine 'treats the whole patient, re-energising and balancing the whole system', explains Dr Zhai, who is a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, a member of the British Fertility Society and the Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine (UK). 'In the UK, TCM is best known for treatment of skin conditions and allergies. But with one person in six and one couple in ten experiencing fertility problems, I expect to see many more people turning to TCM.'

● Dr Zhai's patients suffer from a wide range of infertility problems, including polycystic ovary syndrome, endometriosis, unexplained failure to conceive and persistent miscarriage. 'In women,' she explains, 'TCM can enhance egg quality, strengthen the womb lining and balance hormone levels to give patients the best chance of achieving and maintaining pregnancy – whether they're attempting assisted conception or not.' (Around 40 per cent of Dr Zhai's patients use TCM as a complementary approach alongside conventional assisted fertility treatments such as IVF or ICSI, which involves the microinjection of a single sperm into an egg.) TCM patients receive a combination of Chinese herbs and/or acupuncture – and, says Dr Zhai, 'the average length of treatment is six months'. In China, this is nothing new: 'We've used TCM for many years to treat infertility,' says Dr Zhai, who has an impressive success rate with men, too: among male patients who followed a three-month infertility treatment programme, 63 per cent went on to get their partners pregnant.

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