

My little Chinese takeaway

AFTER YEARS OF FAILED FERTILITY TREATMENTS, CAROLINE STUART FINALLY CONCEIVED... WITH THE HELP OF ANCIENT CHINESE HERBAL REMEDIES. SHE TALKS TO JILL TODD.

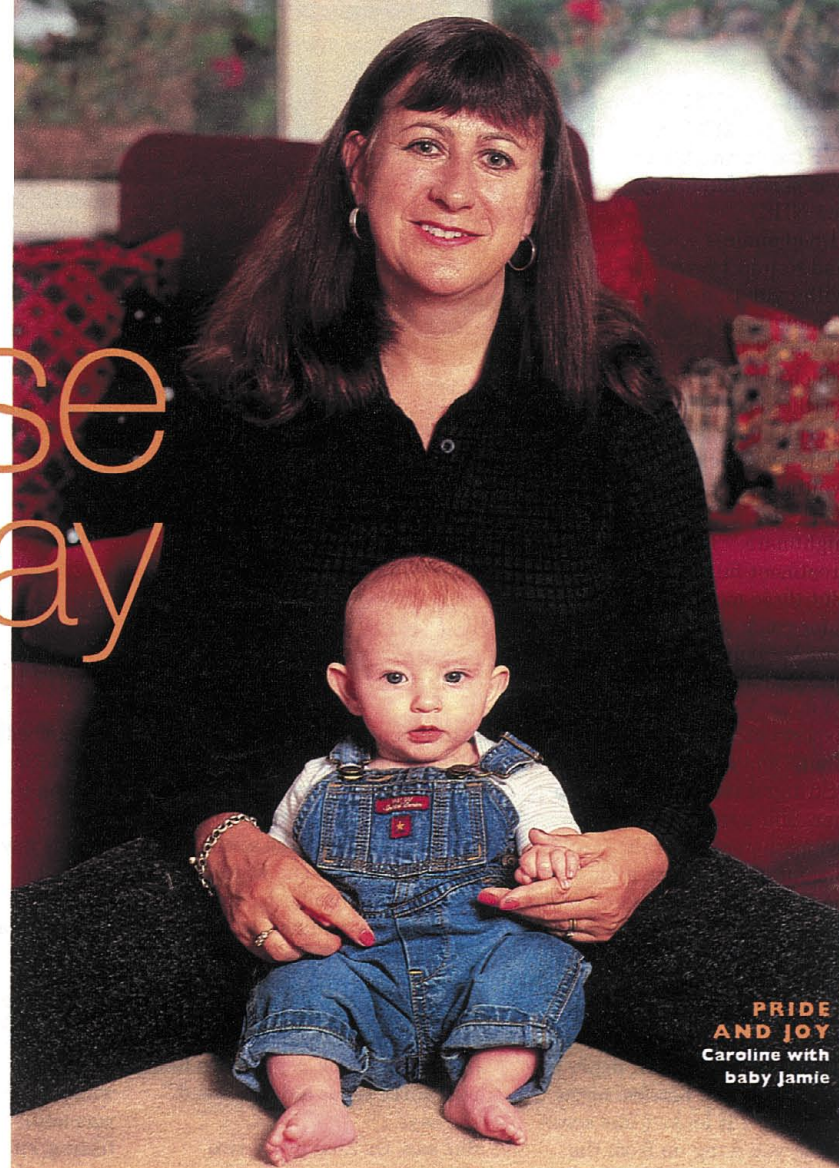
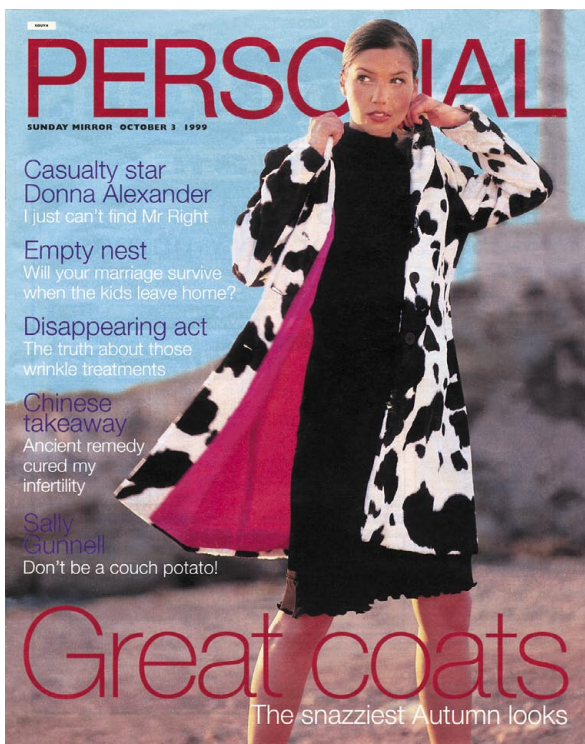
Caroline Stuart stood at her stove gently stirring the contents of a saucepan. But instead of the delicious aromas she normally produced with her cooking, the pungent smells wafting from Caroline's kitchen twice a day were gut-wrenchingly vile. To husband Dave, the special concoction was known as her "witches' brew". But to Caroline, the bubbling mixture of twigs, bark and herbs was her last chance of fulfilling a dream. For as long as she could remember, Caroline, had longed to be a mum. But nine years of happily-married life had led her on an emotional rollercoaster of hope and disappointment in her quest for a child. There were the endless medical tests and failed fertility treatments that only succeeded in plunging the normally sunny-natured Caroline into the deepest despair. But where modern medicine failed, Caroline was to find the answer to her dreams in ancient Chinese herbal remedies. After six months of acupuncture sessions and drinking the evil-tasting potion, the British Airways purser was beside herself with joy when she fell pregnant.

"It tasted so disgusting I had to hold my nose while I drank it - but it was worth every sip. Just look at what it gave me," she says. Nestling in her arms, four-month-old baby Jamie gazes up at his mum. Stroking Jamie's downy head she adds: "Somebody once jokingly called him my 'Chinese take-away!'" Caroline, 43, and builder Dave, 49, who live in Twickenham, Middlesex, started trying for a baby a few years after they were married in 1989. To Caroline's dismay, nothing happened. "We went through the usual endless round of tests but doctors said there was nothing wrong, it was a case of unexplained infertility," she says. "I was upset but thought at least nothing was seriously wrong, that it would happen eventually." Three months later, doctors recommended intrauterine

When friends told me they were pregnant, I'd go home and cry

insemination (IUI), where 'washed' sperm is injected straight into the womb. "I had to take ovarian-stimulating drugs but the first attempt had to be abandoned because too many eggs were produced. It was dangerous. A few months later I tried again but it was unsuccessful. "By then I was getting very upset. It places such a strain on your relationship. I was broody and breaking down in tears every month when my period arrived. Dave was sympathetic and tried to comfort me because he knew how distressed I was, but he felt helpless. "When friends became pregnant

I tried to be pleased for them, but I'd get home and weep. "Every time I switched on the TV there would be teenage mothers producing babies after having sex just once. I thought, 'Here I am, in a stable job, nice house, happy marriage and I only want one baby. It's so unfair'. I became very depressed. The stress was unbelievable." And then, in November 1994, to Caroline and Dave's delight, she fell pregnant naturally. But their joy was short-lived. Eleven weeks later Caroline lost her baby. "I'd waited so long, and then that happened. I was plunged into despair," she says. "I was at my lowest point. I was nearly 40 and I knew time was running out for me." Caroline even visited a spiritual healer. Still she failed to conceive. "I tried reflexology as well, but once again, no baby," she says. ▶



Caroline and Dave then spent £900 on IVF treatment, which was partly funded by the NHS.

"I had endless scans, had to inject myself with ovulation-stimulating drugs and produced 17 eggs, of which three were fertilised with Dave's sperm and implanted.

"The two weeks waiting to see if it worked were a nightmare." The treatment failed. But three months later came the turning point.

"I heard about a Chinese fertility expert called Dr Xiao Ping Zhai," she says.

"Straight away I had faith in her. She was gentle and sympathetic and I felt encouraged because a lot of her patients were my age and on the walls of her clinic there were dozens of photos of their babies. "She looked at my tongue, took my pulse a lot and I had a session of acupuncture. I walked out carrying a brown paper bag full of Chinese berries, herbs and twigs. It looked like something you'd dig up from the garden." Dr Zhai diagnosed that Caroline's regular but light periods indicated low oestrogen levels, which could cause an



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insufficient lining of the uterus. A thick lining is vital for conception. She set out to improve this by increasing the menstrual flow to the womb. Meanwhile, at home Caroline was brewing her herbs and drinking the strained concoction twice a day.

"I was still flying so when I was away on a trip and unable to 'brew up' I had to take a handful of black peppercorn-like pills three times a day instead," she says.

She saw Dr Zhai every two weeks for an acupuncture session and an assessment. "She'd modify the herbal mixture each time. It was a

customised blend," she says. After four months Caroline was starting to despair. "I'd just had my 42nd birthday. I thought, 'This is never going to happen'. I was very weepy one day but Dr Zhai encouraged me to keep going just a bit longer. She was convinced the lining of my womb was improving and so were my chances of conceiving." Two months later, Caroline and Dave were on holiday in Turkey when she realised her period was late. "I bought a pregnancy-testing kit. And there was that precious blue line. I was pregnant!"

Scans later revealed that everything was progressing normally. At 12 weeks Caroline gave up flying. "Thankfully, I then had a perfect pregnancy. I remember breaking the good news to Dr Zhai. I walked in carrying a big bunch of flowers. She took one look at me and burst into tears," she says. On May 29, Jamie Stuart was born. "The herbal treatment wasn't a cheap alternative to IVF," says Caroline. "Each visit cost between £60 and £120, depending on how many herbs I needed. The total cost must have been about £1,000.

"But I liked the idea of something natural. It wasn't the stressful intrusion of IVF and I didn't have to take drugs. "I'm hugely grateful to Dr Zhai. She's helped give us something more precious than words can describe." ■

How traditional Chinese herbal medicine works

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been around for thousands of years and recent research in China indicates an average 80 per cent pregnancy success rate by either treatment with TCM alone or in conjunction with modern assisted fertility treatments. Fertility expert Dr Zhai, who came to Britain in the early 1990s, has also achieved impressive results. A recent study of patients shows that out of 32 infertile women who sought her help and continued treatment for six months, 27 became pregnant. Acupuncture teaches that the body has 12 major channels or meridians through which energy flows. Those used to treat infertility connect with the kidneys, liver and spleen, which are said to play a fundamental role in reproductive medicine. "We seek out and redress imbalances in the system by using herbs to harmonise the two opposing, yet complementary, sides of nature known as the body's Yin/Yang balance," says Dr Zhai. "When a woman is diagnosed as having low progesterone, Western doctors will give her more of it. Chinese medicine helps the body correct the imbalance so that it produces the hormone itself. Pregnancy may then follow naturally." TCM can help with hormonal and ovulatory problems, endometriosis, partially-blocked Fallopian tubes and unexplained infertility. Some herbs stimulate the endocrine system which in turn regulates the hormonal system. Others may improve the function of the reproductive organs while another group is known to alleviate the possibility of miscarriage. Where a man's sperm count or motility is a problem, herbs can improve production of healthy sperm by balancing and strengthening kidney Yin and Yang, the Qi and blood. Almost half of Dr Zhai's male patients were able to produce children due to increased sperm count and motility after taking Chinese herbal medication.

● *The Zhai Clinic, 28 Thames Road, Strand-on-The Green, London W4 3RJ. 0181 742 3729.*

Other alternative fertility methods

Virtually every branch of alternative medicine claims to treat infertility. It is often impossible to prove that the treatment has worked - chance or the placebo effect may have played a part.

ACUPUNCTURE

At least one trial suggests it can help. Forty-five infertile women were given acupuncture. A matched group were treated with hormones. In the acupuncture group 22 became pregnant. In the other group, 20 conceived. *British Acupuncture Council: 0181 964 1222.*

AROMATHERAPY

There have been some success stories with both male and female infertility. Ylang ylang, jasmine and sandalwood are said to have relaxing, sedative and aphrodisiac effects. *Aromatherapy Organisations Council. 01858 434242.*

CRANIAL OSTEOPATHY

Said to be particularly useful for those having difficulty conceiving a second or subsequent child because the problem may be due to injuries sustained in childbirth. It can also help clear blockages in Fallopian tubes. *Osteopathic Information Services. 0171 799 2559.*

HYPNOTHERAPY

Some proven success in treating unexplained infertility. Practitioners are able to reach a person's subconscious and access the mental or emotional blocks which may be preventing conception. *Central Register of Advanced Hypnotherapists. 0171 354 9938.*