

A London doctor who uses traditional Chinese medicine to help childless couples seems to be getting results where conventional treatment has failed.
LOUISE MANSON reports

THE walls of Dr Xiao Ping Zhai's clinic in Chiswick are lined with so many pictures of cute babies that you could think you had walked into an IVF clinic. In fact Dr Zhai specialises in treating infertility with a combination of Chinese herbs and acupuncture and increasing numbers of her clients are men. The main cause of male infertility is a low sperm count and/or production of defective sperm, a problem experienced by up to 30 per cent of men. Five per cent produce no sperm at all.

A typical preparation to boost low sperm count would include dried herbs of wolfberry fruit, prepared rehmannia root, Chinese yam and schizandra fruit.

Although traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has been practised for thousands of years, many western doctors refuse to condone its use, mainly because the industry is unregulated and results unproven. Mr Dickinson Cowan, medical director of the fertility unit at The Portland Hospital in Great Portland Street, says: "I would advise anyone considering taking Chinese herbs to have a western diagnosis first." However, he admits: "I can also understand how someone would want to try TCM when all else has failed."

One couple's story

Steve Mead, 36, and his wife Julie, 35, run their own security systems business. They tried unsuccessfully for a baby for seven years before approaching Dr Zhai.

Steve says: "For the first couple of years of trying we weren't really too concerned. We were both quite young and healthy. After about five years my wife had some tests but they couldn't find anything wrong. We then saw a specialist and I was told I had a low sperm count.

"I was shocked and didn't fully understand what this meant. I was told that it was unlikely that we would ever have a baby. We were offered ICSI and IVF. But I was unhappy about the prospect of

my wife going through all this treatment, it was expensive and the success rates were low. We'd also have to wait several months to get on the waiting list. I was told that there was nothing else that could be done for the 'male factor'. I felt gutted and didn't know what to do.

"I can see how low sperm count can be embarrassing to some men, but even so I was determined to do something about it. Shortly after my diagnosis I met someone who had the same problem and he told me he had just started seeing Dr Zhai.

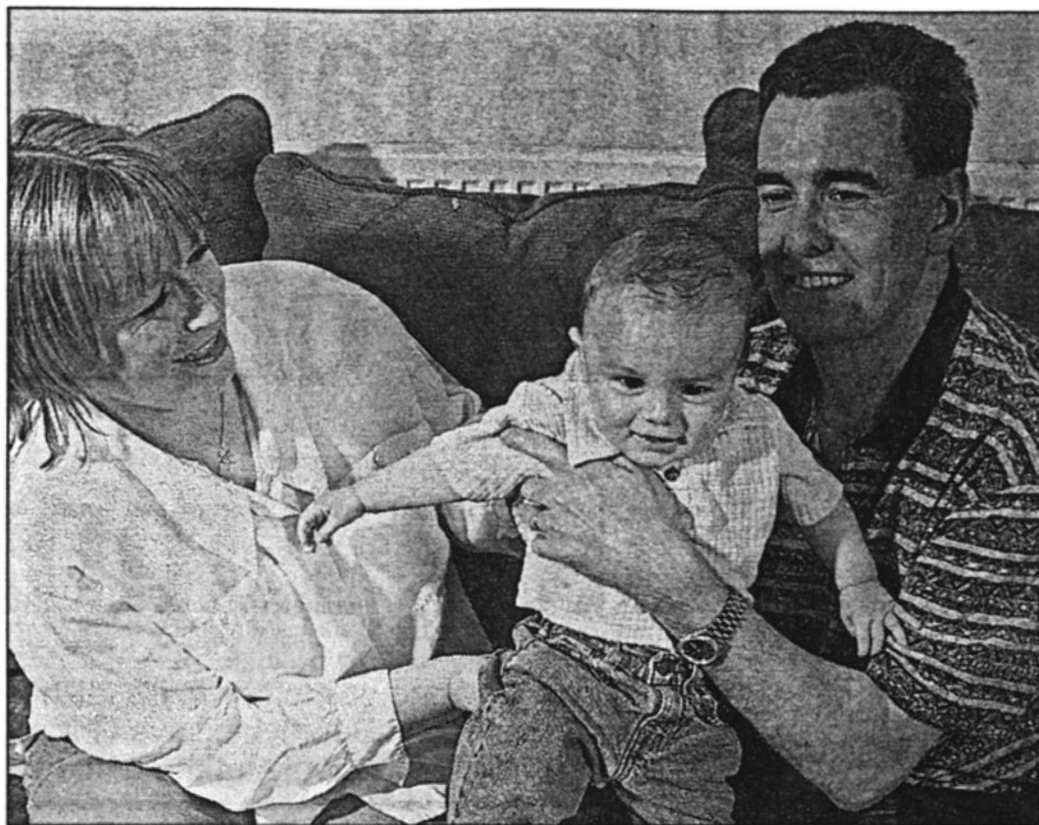
"At my first appointment Dr Zhai asked me loads of questions and noted down in Chinese everything about me — my movements, my appearance etc. She prescribed Chinese herbs to boil up and drink like tea. I didn't know what was in it but took it anyway

because I felt I had nothing to lose.

"Two weeks later, I went back and my sperm count had gone up. I was delighted. Although the herbs tasted horrible I was prepared to carry on taking them, as every time we went back to her we could see a difference. One week it did go down but she just changed one of the herbs and it continued to rise.

"Four and a half months later, my wife was pregnant. We couldn't believe it! I have since been told by the medical profession that it is just luck and nothing to do with Chinese medicine, but after trying for seven years I don't think it can be luck.

"For years we used to see couples with babies in pushchairs and my wife would say we'll never have one. But now we're the ones with the baby in the pushchair — it's fantastic."



Joy of parenthood: Steve and Julie Mead with their nine-month-old son Daniel

Gavin Fogg

A father after a seven-year wait

●Further information from Zhai Natural Remedies Clinic, 28 Thames Road, W4, 0181 742 3728, or 10 Harley Street, W1, 0171 467 8420. First consultation £80, four weeks' supply of medication from £155.

●For advice on all aspects of fertility problems contact: Issue, The National Fertility Association, 114 Lichfield Street, Walsall, WS1 1SZ, 01922 722888. A male counsellor is available on Friday nights between 8pm and 10pm.