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FERTILITY: ‘OPTIONAL EXTRA’ SCAMS

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‘Playing roulette with vulnerable people’s feelings is the antithesis of care.’

Emma Barnett

Falling pregnant is in some ways like winning a game of chance. One either succeeds or one doesn’t. There’s no partial outcome (*note 1*). I’m not talking here about whether a baby is successfully delivered, or the gambler actually collects his or her winnings; either one is pregnant or not and either one’s number comes up (or whatever), or it doesn’t. The outcome of many gambling games (e.g. betting on the toss of a coin) is purely, as we say, ‘determined by chance’ but for others, knowledge and expertise may enhance the probability of a successful outcome (this topic will be addressed in a future ‘Logic and Intuition’). Regarding pregnancy, as long as the two participants do the right thing, much is ‘left to chance’ but again there are things that can be done to enhance the likelihood of conception (*note 2*).

If one adopts a strictly deterministic position, then by ‘chance’ we seem to be referring to those factors that are out of our control. We cannot, for example, toss a coin in such a way that it will always fall heads up; hence we may say that ‘it’s left to fate’. Likewise there are physiological factors that may affect the chances of conception that neither party can do anything about.

The more uncertain a successful outcome due to these ‘chance’ factors, the more attempts required to achieve it, and the more desperate the need to do so, then the more likely it is that the behaviour of the participants will come under the influence of erroneous beliefs and practices – religion, superstition, pseudoscience, and crackpottery of every description. And in the case of the desire to conceive, there more ‘experts’ there will be on hand to exploit the couple’s desperation.

In November 2018 a consensus statement agreed by 11 organisations, including the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, was published that expressed concerns about how frequently private fertility clinics are charging patients for optional extras without any evidence that they increase the chances of pregnancy. Couples were often persuaded by private doctors to buy these ‘add-ons’, costing up to £3,500 a time, such as ‘glue’ or a painful ‘scratch’ to help an embryo stick to the wall of the womb.

According to one newspaper (*note 3*) ‘Tracy Wint underwent two years of unsuccessful IVF treatment, spending more than £20,000 to have a second child with husband Mark. ‘In that time she claims Oxford Fertility “dangled” additional treatments at them when they were vulnerable. ... The couple say doctors convinced them to pay an extra £7,000 for “worthless” add-ons. Mrs Wint, 41, said: “We feel like we’ve paid out thousands for add-ons that are not proven to work and carry health risks”. ... After a miscarriage, Mrs Wint went on to have three cycles of IVF, all of which failed’.

In the *Times* on 18.11.18 there was a column by Emma Barnett titled ‘When you’re desperate to conceive, you’ll pay anything and clinics are cashing in’. She describes her and her husband’s experience of 2½ years trying for a baby. Reluctant to take the IVF route they persisted ‘month in, month out’ in doing it ‘the natural way’ until finally Ms Barnett embarked on a search for alternative methods such as acupuncture, ‘in a dingy basement in Manchester’s Chinatown ... from a gruff man who couldn’t speak English and simply nodded in a confused fashion when I told him that I have endometriosis and wanted to get pregnant’. He then sold her some herbs for £75 to be drunk in hot water twice a day. Then followed colonic irrigation then ‘I felt crystals being pushed into my palms and was advised to change my entire diet. This is why I gave stool samples to a nutritionist and bought all manner of expensive vitamins and powders to neutralise my stomach and general digestive system’. Eventually a medical doctor persuaded her and her husband to try IVF - and it worked.

Notes

1. The website MedicineNet defines pregnancy as ‘The state of carrying a developing embryo or fetus within the female body’. <http://tinyurl.com/ycam7al9>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/y8unhzgr>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/yalbxuqp>