



McCabe Photography

Nikki Horne and her daughter Madison at the Obex Medical office.

# A life in limbo

The rate of infertility in New Zealand is steadily increasing and many couples are turning to IVF to help them conceive. Gill South examines the impact this has on working women, and how employers can ease the way for them.

Going through IVF fertility treatment as well as holding down a full time position is like having two jobs, says ASB's Steffan Brunner, chief manager of human resources. He's right. Speaking to women who have gone through the process to help them have children, it is as if they have studied for a medical degree. Their knowledge of the process is phenomenal. "You get obsessed about it. You think about it all the time," says one IVF mother.

As they are being prepared for IVF, women go through a "hormone roller coaster", according to John Peek, group operations manager at infertility specialists, Fertility Associates. "I think quite a lot of people find ordinary everyday life and IVF very demanding," he says. Depression is common, as are miscarriages and physical surgeries if they have conditions like endometriosis or polycystic ovaries.

Infertility among women in their 30s and 40s is not going away. One in five New Zealand women born in the 1960s will be prevented

from having children due to infertility, compared to one in 10 women who were born in the 1940s or earlier, according to FertilityNZ. The average age of women going through Fertility Associates is 36.

The good news is IVF is working for the majority. Employers are not necessarily signing up for five years of mood swings and sick leave. For women of 35, the first cycle of IVF has a success rate of 45 to 50 percent. On average, people go through the process for two or three years.

"It's the 21st century, IVF is no longer taboo or freak science," says Michelle Collyer, executive officer of FertilityNZ, the infertility support organisation.

ASB, which has 5500 employees, is making a concerted effort to support its staff who are undergoing IVF treatment. It is also aware that the male partners need support too.

Of course, it's not totally out of the kindness of its heart—it's because it makes good business sense. It is common for women going through



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IVF to leave their jobs because it is such an all-consuming process and they want to give it their all. These usually mature women often hold positions of some responsibility and have built up a wealth of intellectual knowledge, which makes them valuable people to lose.

Employers can ease the way for them and retain them even if it is another job or a part-time post. ASB does have a process to help. "What we do is try and encourage our managers to have a close enough relationship with employees that they will feel comfortable about telling them," says Brunner. "It's also important that they need to decide who they want to disclose it to and what they want them to do with [the information]."

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Brunner says people resign even if they do have a supportive employer. "They may decide the best thing for them is to take work out of the equation. We have had examples where people have been given substantial leave without pay, a period where they can get out of the work environment."

Even if they do this at the time, they may well come back to work later. "If they are leaving us on good terms, they are always welcome to come back," he says.

### More sensitivity than usual

There is no case law history on the employment rights of women undergoing IVF in New Zealand. "Most employers would take a reasonable approach," says Minter Ellison Rudd Watt senior associate, Emma Warden. "It's a difficult process which [requires] a little more sensitivity than usual,"

Most large companies, ASB included, offer an employee assistance programme, which is there to provide counselling for those going through any kind of stress—including IVF. Legally these women have got a statutory entitlement to sick leave on the days they are feeling unwell during the IVF treatment. People also, typically, take holiday leave or unpaid leave. Employers are pretty flexible as long as they know about it, of course.

According to UK support group Infertility Network UK, 61 percent of those undergoing IVF treatment were too scared or embarrassed to tell their bosses. The figures would be similar here, says FertilityNZ.

Nikki Horne, now mother of a little girl, Madison, had no problem informing her employer, the fast-growing medical instrument distributor, Obex Medical. "My focus was, at that time, to have a family. At the company I worked for they realised that that was inevitable, so they made the decision to support me."

An events organiser, she took sick leave when recovering from

miscarriages, and some time off after each egg collection. Her boss's attitude was: "Take whatever time off you need, no questions asked."

She also negotiated going part-time after finding the treatment and the miscarriages taking a toll on her health. "It takes your life over, everything revolves around it."

Horne felt for her husband as she was getting all this support from work. "It's very difficult for males. They don't discuss it," she says. None of his work colleagues were aware of what he was going through. People would say insensitive things like: "Isn't it time you got your wife pregnant?"

When they did get pregnant successfully, after the 13-week scan her husband sent an email to his colleagues and friends from work. It said: "After four years, six rounds of IVF, four miscarriages, finally at 13 weeks, we are pregnant."

"I think quite a few of those guys were mortified," says Horne.

Obex Medical was third equal in the small workplaces category in the 2007 JRA / *Unlimited* Best Places to Work survey. The company has incredible staff retention, says Horne, who is back working there part-time.

Linda Robert, a director of Obex Medical, says Horne's work was never affected. "Nikki's a terrific worker. She just ploughs through things. I did not notice a decline." But she was temperamental. "People just did not take her to task on her moods," Robert says.

You could argue as an employer that once the woman has the baby, she may never want to return to work because the baby is so precious. "You never know for sure if they will come back to work. With maternity leave, we try to be flexible, there's give and take," says Robert.

Obex supplies some medical instruments for IVF treatment so the directors of the company were reasonably knowledgeable about the IVF process and its side effects. Employers who want to learn more can contact FertilityNZ or the fertility clinics for information.

Ros Ferguson\*, a primary teacher, was very touched when the principal of her school informed herself from the FertilityNZ website. "It was really good knowing that she had taken the time," she says. Her advice to people in the workplace is to just use common sense, like a bereavement in the family. "You want to know that people care," she says.

Although well supported by her school, including a letter from the Board of Trustees urging her to stay, Ferguson still resigned. "I felt the quality of what I had to offer was not as good as it was," she says. "I felt my brain was not functioning. The kids started to comment. I said things that didn't make sense like: 'Put the tables on the chairs.'" Life improved when she went substitute teaching.

Dr Guy Gudex, medical director of IVF Auckland, says there are things fertility clinics can do for working couples. The clinic offers

ultrasound tests not just first thing in the mornings but at lunchtimes and later in the day. Men can come in for sperm tests on Saturdays.

Gudex is happy to tell employers what to expect from a staff member going through IVF. The process is getting quicker, making it less taxing, he says. Probably half to two-thirds of IVF cycles are short ones with, generally speaking, fewer side effects. Injections are done over 11 days instead of three weeks, which people find much more user-friendly.

For someone going through IVF, you need to respect their privacy, he says. "It's a balance between privacy and being supportive."

Kate Emory\* is one of the many women who never said anything at work. "My employer never knew—I have always been one for separating work and personal life," she says.

She couldn't stand people asking questions, and having to tell them when it did not work—it was hard enough with friends and family. Her advice to people who want to be supportive to women at work going through the process is: "Don't ask, people will tell you."

Emory used to find it too stressful to have her results phoned in at work. She and her husband would drive down to Victoria Park in Auckland and her husband would call the clinic from the mobile. "The first few times, you are in floods of tears, you have convinced yourself that you are pregnant," she says.

While Emory says her job saved her, Theresa Carter\*, who had a senior job in a food company, decided to throw the towel in at work. She went to resign and gave the reason for leaving.

It turned out her boss's wife had had three miscarriages and he persuaded her to stay, saying she could work whatever hours she wanted. It was such a relief not to be making excuses anymore, she says. "When I work, I love to give it my all, I felt like I was slacking off."

Her treatment at work made her "eternally grateful" and although she is currently at home with her baby, she helped to find her replacement and doesn't rule out returning. "I take my hat off to anyone who is in a full-time job and does an IVF cycle," says Carter.

What employers should understand is that IVF is addictive, says Samantha Moore\*. "It's like gambling, it's the lotto ticket for me. The chances of it working are five percent in my case."

Moore, 38, has a list of things people should avoid saying. Reactions like: "Ooh you'll get twins!" and "Oh poor you," are not ideal. People not telling you that they are pregnant because they're afraid you'll feel bad is not the best attitude. "You don't want to be excluded," she says. And comments like "You just need to relax" drive her up the wall. "This is a medical condition not a case of positive thinking!"

"The emotional stuff is hard to convey. Your life is in limbo. It's very hard to know, do you take this job because in two weeks something will happen. We have been trying to buy a home, we still don't know, it's very hard to plan."

When the Moores have had bad news, they find getting away is the best thing. And Moore is always very careful in selecting the person she will tell at work. "You have got to find someone to trust. I really need someone who will keep their mouth shut, otherwise you get all of these questions from every man and his dog. You need to come to work and know there's a boundary there. You are constantly trying to control some things in your life. "Work is often a bit of a saviour."

For information on infertility visit: [www.fertilitynz.org.nz](http://www.fertilitynz.org.nz)

\* Not her real name.

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