Silent suffering

Jill Emery

I would like to share with you my feelings on what it is like not to be able to have a child of our own. For years I was told to use contraception to prevent a pregnancy and idly went on taking the contraceptive pill until the time came for us to try for a baby. We had never really thought about having difficulties conceiving and it all came as a bit of a shock when we realised that there may be something wrong.

Infertility manifests itself in many ways. Christmas is perceived as being a family occasion, but for me, and for many infertile couples this is the worst time of the year. I see family and friends going off to watch nativity plays and I long to be there, sitting in the audience, shedding a tear when I see our child walk on the stage.

We face pain and heartbreak when friends and family have babies. We cannot avoid the situation but desperately wish that we did not have to see the new arrival. My sister in law recently gave birth to a baby girl. The baby was thrust into my arms and the feelings I had were ones of mixed emotion. She stared up at me and I had feelings of both joy and great sadness. Joy because all new life is a miracle but sadness as I so wanted that baby to be mine. The pain became even greater when the baby was given to my husband—I saw him holding the baby and felt that he was deprived of so much because I cannot give him his own baby. We will never hear our children's first words nor watch them take

their first steps. The saddest part will always be not hearing a child call us Mummy or Daddy.

As infertile couples we shed many tears, sometimes openly but often in private when our lives seem so desolate. We feel that no one understands our grief and sorrow, and that we are the only ones in the world with a problem. After years of treatment we know that is not the case, but infertility makes you feel as if your world has come to an end and no one else can possibly share the same grief as you.

"Infertility makes you feel as if your world has come to an end."

Our families and friends try to understand but often make comments that dig deep into our souls. They refer to our successful careers, our new cars, and exotic holidays. We would swap all the material things in life for a baby, but if we cannot have a baby then we must try and make the best of our lives and endeavour to fill the gap that childlessness leaves.

My mother has always told me how much joy I have brought to her life. She was 40 when I was born after she had been told that she would probably never have a child. That was 33 years ago when infertility was practically unheard of. But the stigma of infertility is still as prevalent now as it was then. Couples do not want to tell their families and friends of their problems as it is still perceived as being something that should be kept quiet.

Fatherhood and manhood have been linked through the centuries and this has created a culture where to have no children means you are not "much of a man." We have all been subjected to comments from male friends such as "I will give you a baby" or "I only need to look at a woman and she's pregnant." How callous these comments are. Is it any wonder that the stigma of infertility exists?

Men's emotional needs are neglected so often during the investigations and treatments. Men have been conditioned to be brave and show no emotion and many men feel torn apart by infertility but feel they cannot show it. Men hear their family, friends, and colleagues wistfully sharing the delights of being present at one of the most moving moments in anyone's life—the birth of their child. Imagine how that must make a man who knows he will probably never experience that miracle feel.

Infertility is like a bereavement as we grieve in the same way. The difference is that our loss is not something tangible. We cannot look back on times we have shared with a loved one as we do with a normal bereavement. We can only look back on an emptiness and years of pain and desolation. Our only consolation is to look forward with hope. Assisted conception is our only hope.

But why do we have to fight in vain for the family we want? Why is in vitro fertilisation the only treatment excluded in the patient's charter on waiting list limits? For most couples it is an option only if you can pay. Who has decided that the pain we suffer is of no concern to the NHS?—JILL EMERY lives in Ashington, Northumberland

Was it wrong to want a baby?

Alison Cobb

Some months ago we failed in our fourth and last attempt to have a child using ovum donation and in vitro fertilisation. I am 61. With my first husband, in my late 20s, I had had three children in four years. We later separated and then divorced. Twenty years ago, when the youngest was 12, I fell in love with a wonderful man. At 47, he is 14 years younger than me. He has no children.

Unsure that love with such a big age gap could last, it was at least five years before we asked a fertility clinic why I did not get pregnant. We paid for a sperm test and laparoscopy, which indicated nothing wrong except that at 47, I was probably too old. Later that year, accepting that we would never have a child together, we got married

and lived happily in various remote places in Africa.

Eleven years after that, back in England, one of my children, now a doctor and a mother, told us that a woman of 60 in Italy had had a baby. We questioned ourselves all over again. Was I so old now that I could not bring up a baby? Were we selfish? Would it be teased? Would it wish it had never been born? Surely not. I would, I hoped, be there for most of its childhood. My husband, I knew, would be a wonderful father. He was then 44, and many of his contemporaries, our friends, were then and still are fathering children.

After a long search we were thrilled when a famous teaching hospital in this country took us on. The hospital was afraid of the press and asked us to tell no one. It was hard not to talk about it to friends, nor to my husband's loving parents. We felt very isolated.

We were impressed at the excellent treatment, at the kindness and support that we received from the staff, and in particular from our sensitive, calm, and openminded counsellor. We were surprised that our case had to go before an ethics committee though

we ourselves were not allowed to, nor even to know who the members were. Nothing had changed for us: we had always wanted a baby, and now, long after we thought it was too late, there seemed, amazingly, to be a tiny chance. If we succeeded what on earth did the ethics committee think we were going to do with such a hard won baby, if not dearly love it?

We were thoroughly warned of the chances of failure and of the unknown problems due to the lack of experience in treating people my age. But we passed the hurdles and the HIV test, did a drugs dummy run, and received a very funny letter of congratulation on the state of my endometrium.

We were walking on air when the day for treatment came. Progesterone was then administered by pessary, whose only known side effect is euphoria. Wearing bath caps and sockettes made of blue J-cloths, we were given two small jars and shown into an amazing room, brilliantly lit, which boasted posters and magazines of smiling women with huge breasts and no pubic hair, sitting in unfortunate positions. It was an absurd and disgraceful place to make a baby. After