

Makin'

Babies

Once, a family was largely defined as a married, heterosexual couple with their own birth children. In today's society the definition of 'family' is more diverse. Same sex families are an important part of this new meaning. Changes in the adoption process, the introduction of civil partnership and an overall change in society mean same sex couples are no longer expected to miss out on family life.

More and more same sex couples are beginning to create a family and there are many ways to go about it. You could foster or adopt or if there are already children in the house, take full legal parental responsibility for your partner's birth child. One option growing in popularity amongst lesbian couples is having your own child via donor sperm. More and more fertility clinics offer a donor service to same sex couples, but only one has been doing it for many years. The London Women's Clinic, formerly known as the Bourne-Hallam Medical Centre, has been involved with fertility management since 1984. A major part of their work is to help same sex couples conceive.

The legal stuff

Natalie Gamble is a legal expert and solicitor with leading law firm Lester Aldridge who works with the London Women's Fertility Clinic to advise potential parents. She explains how there is a clear legal process when it comes to lesbian parents having their own child. "The first thing is to get some information on where you stand legally because the law does not give the same protection to lesbians as to heterosexual couples. In a heterosexual couple, the man automatically becomes the father after artificial insemination and birth, but lesbian partners of the birth mother don't. The birth mother will be the only legal mother when the child is born. Draft laws to change this are being produced, however, changing the law may take some time so for now, it is important to get the legal process right".



Gamble adds: "There is a clear three-stage process, the first stage of which can happen before birth or even before conception. The birth mother must update her will and grant her partner legal responsibility for the child in the event of her death. This means straight away, the child's future is protected. After birth comes the second stage when the birth mother's partner can apply for parental responsibility. This doesn't make you a parent so things such as inheritance rights are not automatic, but it does give you day to day rights. You can do things like talk to the school and take them to hospital, so practically it gives you what you need. If you are civil partners then you just have to sign a form. If you aren't, you need to make a court application, but it is still a very simple process. Thirdly, once the baby is six months old, you can apply to adopt which gives you total parental rights."

But what about the father? Does the donor, anonymous or not, have any parental rights? "Some couples conceive with a known donor" says Gamble. "In this case the legal position can get quite complex. If you home inseminate, he is automatically the father. The clinic deals with quite a few couples who come to them with donors which does make a massive difference to the legal position because through the clinic, he may not have such rights and responsibilities. The law isn't 100% clear so care needs to be taken but we do draw up paper work before hand. On the whole, the clinic deals with anonymous donors and has one of the biggest sperm banks in the country. Until 2005, donors were completely anonymous. Then the law changed so that once the child has reached 18, they can apply for the details about the sperm donor. These rules meant a large stock of sperm had to be destroyed and in effect, the bank started again from scratch. However, the London Women's Clinic still has a massive stock of sperm ready to be used".

The clinical staff


So how does it all work? Dr. Kamal Ahuja is one of the most renowned infertility specialists in the U.K. Since 1986, Dr. Ahuja has been the Scientific & Managing Director of the Cromwell IVF & Fertility Centres, to which the London Women's Clinic is now amalgamating aspects of their patient care and egg-sharing programmes. "Probably about 90% of donations go to single-sex couples" he says. "We have on any given day 20 to 30 sperm donors coming into the clinic. All of them are properly screened and have to complete an in depth history sheet. The sperm itself is also tested and screened very methodically before it is used and the physical process is not very intrusive at all."

The London Women's Clinic has been a pioneer in a new process called 'egg sharing'. Dr. Ahuja, who is instrumental in the process, explains the process of egg-sharing and how it works. "Egg sharing is when IVF patients donate 50% of the eggs retrieved to put in the egg donors bank. The idea caused a lot of controversy but we felt it was good because often when women go through IVF they produce a lot more eggs than they need. There are a lot of people who need eggs too and we felt that if we need eggs, we should collect from these women rather than donor women as the process is quite complex and much more different to something like giving blood. It would also not be possible to start an advertising campaign to appeal for donors because of the difficult ethical issues. The process was long and sharing didn't start until 1996. It was quite a long battle but in the end our ideas were accepted."

Lesbians welcome?

Naturally, a same sex couple will be keen to find a clinic where they are welcomed and their different needs met. The London Women's Clinic was one of the first fertility clinic to offer treatment to lesbian couples and continues to offer an understanding and non-judgemental approach. An inclusive and understanding support structure exists for lesbians to receive any form of treatment they require.

To find out more about the London Women's Clinic or to book an initial appointment, check out www.lwclinic.co.uk ■



Thinking of IVF treatment?

For nearly 20 years we've helped many single women and couples with donor sperm and eggs.

Our Innovative egg sharing programme provides free IVF treatment for hundreds of women who are under 35 yrs old and qualify as egg donors. Free information evenings are regularly held at our centres to discuss these treatments.

Please call to reserve your place at our next open evening or to make an appointment:

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Call 02920 734 008 or
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The London Women's Clinic

INSEMINAR

21 November 2007
113-115 Harley Street, W1G 6AP
An open day and seminar for women considering donor insemination.

Open day runs from 9.30am to 4.30pm.
Seminars start at 11.00am and 3.00pm each for approximately one hour.

To find out more and or to reserve your place at the seminar, please contact us by phone or email.

Call 020 7487 0019 or email stephanie@londonwomensclinic.com
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The London Women's Clinic
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