

Vatican compounds difficult choices for infertile couples

Document confounded parents, clinicians

By Teresa A. Parsons

"A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on! And so he made the CARE team possible. We thank Him and all of you from the bottom of our hearts."

This is the inscription on a plaque presented to Strong Memorial Hospital's Childbearing by Alternative Reproduction program by the parents of one of the 19 children born through the program.

CARE's nurse/coordinator, Katherine Schwarz, recalled that the mother — a Catholic — created a small shrine with religious objects in her hospital room while she was undergoing the in-vitro fertilization process.

Earlier this month, that mother and hundreds of others read headlines proclaiming that a new Vatican document prohibited Catholics from using in-vitro fertilization, embryo transfer and artificial insemination. "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation," released March 10 by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, thus ruled out some of the most promising new technologies available to that 10 percent of all couples who are infertile.

Technicians and parents in the CARE program are puzzled by the stance the Vatican has taken, according to Schwarz.

"We haven't had people calling to say they're going to reconsider," she said. "The comments I've heard from parents convey a sense of bewilderment. They're saying they're going to proceed, but that it's a shame that this has been questioned."

Schwarz, who is Catholic herself, questioned why the document grouped so many different treatments under the same heading of disapproval.

"I think that treating a married couple is a very different issue from the case of a lesbian couple using donor sperm," she said. "I am puzzled about some of the very strong words that were reported from the document. I am also concerned for parents who are feeling stress as a result of it ... I wouldn't want people to feel remorse or guilt unnecessarily."

Since it was established at Strong in 1983, the CARE program has served nearly 130 couples. Of that number, 17 women have given birth to 19 healthy infants (including two sets of twins).

Couples who seek treatment through the CARE program most often suffer from missing or irreparably damaged Fallopian tubes, low sperm production, endometriosis that has not responded to therapy or unexplained infertility.

Before gaining referral to the CARE program, couples must have pursued a range of other diagnostic and therapeutic options, possibly including surgery and hormonal treatment.

By the time they begin considering in-vitro fertilization, most couples have already been through a costly, complicated process that is both physically and emotionally draining.

Such couples are in for more of the same if they opt for in-vitro fertilization. Each treatment costs approximately \$5,600 and has roughly a 20-percent chance of success. Often, the charges are not covered by health insurance.

"There are not an easy bunch of choices out there for infertile people," Schwarz said.

The Vatican document offers yet another hard choice for couples unable to conceive through sanctioned means, urging them to accept their infertility as "a cross from God." It also offers adoption as an alternative.

Many parents who apply for the in-vitro program are simultaneously trying to adopt a child, according to Schwarz. But those who seek a healthy, white infant may wait for years. Although older children, infants who are biracial or handicapped are more readily available for adoption, they are not the answer for every couple, Schwarz said.

Despite the sacrifice in-vitro fertilization requires, neither Schwarz nor Father Daniel Tormey, chaplain at Strong Memorial Hospital, has encountered couples whose lives were negatively affected by technical intervention in the reproductive process.

"These parents are not looking for the perfect baby," Schwarz said. "If you had tried for 10 years to have a baby, it would be kind of unusual to encounter a very picky attitude."

On the contrary, Father Tormey observed that the dedication, love and enthusiasm with which most people enter the CARE program is enhanced by the effort they've had to make.

Most married couples see (IVF) very clearly as an instrument of God to help them overcome this 'disease' (of infertility)," he said. "They have difficulty in accepting infertility as God's cross, because they believe they can have children through this procedure, and if God didn't want them to have children, then it would fail."

Father Tormey believes that the document speaks very well in pointing out that science and technology have to be at the service of people and not the other way around.

But he noted that scientists, doctors and clinicians have long discussed and debated the same technical and moral concerns reflected in the document. "People have to appreciate the fact that in a place like this, that kind of message is going on all the time," he said.

As evidence, he pointed to the University of Rochester School of Medicine's department of human values in medical education.

Likewise, from its inception, the CARE program has consulted with a multi-disciplinary committee of philosophers, social workers, chaplains and parents, who provide ethical and moral guidance on its procedures and program outlines.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
CARE's nurse/coordinator, Katherine Schwarz, displays photographs of some of the 19 children who were born through Strong Memorial Hospital's in-vitro fertilization program.

As a result of a recommendation from the committee, the CARE program chose to treat only married, heterosexual couples and to return to the mother's body all zygotes fertilized through the in-vitro process.

Officials at Strong are now considering whether to offer a new procedure through the CARE program, known as GIFT or Gamete-Intra-Fallopian Transfer, Schwarz said.

The procedure, which has not been ruled out by the Vatican document, involves placing ovum and sperm together in a catheter and inserting them into the woman's Fallopian tube, where conception would occur.

GIFT is estimated to be 10 percent more effective than in-vitro fertilization and substantially less expensive, since no embryo transfer and less laboratory time are required.

Church approval, however, is likely to hinge on how the sperm is collected. Masturbation is not acceptable. Yet some theologians believe document guidelines may allow a method whereby the couple has intercourse using a perforated condom, from which the sperm can be retrieved afterward.

Whether or not that procedure is deemed acceptable depends in part on whether conception could be considered to have

occurred through the conjugal act.

Currently, the CARE program's ethics committee is also exploring the ethical and legal implications of freezing embryos, a practice the program has not adopted to date.

Cancer patients are among those who seek to have their embryos stored, Schwarz explained, since some treatments for the disease can produce infertility.

Schwarz said she welcomes evaluation of such procedures from sources outside the program, including the Vatican document.

"It can only be good to have people question you and raise the issues society is dealing with," she said. "I think it is healthy to have people who are objective and who are not directly involved monitoring what we're doing."

But, Father Tormey believes, unless the medical and scientific communities perceive the document as making a positive contribution, the Church could exclude itself from dialogue with those communities.

"Press reports emphasized it (the document) simply as a question of condemnation," he said. "And because of its weak argumentation, people are perhaps going to miss its good points."

"It would be a real shame if it turns off discussion," he added.



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Father Daniel Tormey

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