

Good Medicine

Catholic physicians work to provide life-giving alternatives to reproductive technologies.

by Colleen Rouleau

When Lisa and Jason Maxson of Omaha, Neb., married in October 2007, they knew that they might never be able to have a child. Lisa had received treatment for a hormonal imbalance since 2003. Although the correction of the imbalance helped to alleviate some of her symptoms, she was also diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome. The couple was informed that this condition, which impedes ovulation, would make conception very unlikely. Current statistics indicate that nearly one in six couples of childbearing age experience infertility - defined as an inability to conceive after one year of normal intercourse. This leads many to turn to reproductive technologies that are readily available at fertility clinics.

For the Maxsons, however, solutions such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) were simply not an option. They accepted the Catholic teaching about techniques that disassociate the union of husband and wife from procreation. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, these techniques violate the nature of married love and offend the dignity of the person and the rights of the child (see 2373-79). Where, then, does a couple like the Maxsons turn? Thankfully, there are medical options that respect human dignity when facing the problem of infertility. Throughout North America, there are physicians whose way of viewing married couples and the gift of new life causes them to practice medicine differently. These doctors are providing successful fertility care that is offering real hope and healing.

Fruitful Alternatives

During Dr. Carlos Vera's medical residency, he noticed there was often a dismissive attitude among doctors concerning a patient's capacity to take responsibility for his or her fertility. Birth control was seen as a solution to all sorts of irregularities in a woman's cycle, and no explanations were given to patients about the pill's negative side effects. At the time, Vera prescribed contraception for various reasons and conditions. Yet, he increasingly found that his patients wanted to be treated with greater respect. A desire to treat his patients in a more human manner is what ultimately led Vera, a member of Archbishop Fulton Sheen Council 7502 in Denver, to change his approach to fertility.

At his parish, Vera saw a pamphlet about natural family planning (NFP) training and registered with his wife for the seminar. It was there he learned that hormonal birth control can act as an abortifacient – that is, by preventing the implantation of an embryo after conception. "We don't realize the gravity of some of the things we are doing," said Vera. "I realized that someday I would have to answer to God." For years now, Vera has worked with NFP practitioners in his area. He emphasizes that fertility awareness and fertility-focused intercourse have helped many couples to conceive children. "Every time I see a patient who is pregnant, I thank God for the work being done by Catholic doctors that are following the Church," said Vera. "I am really seeing God's work."

Dr. Anne Mielnik, the director and co-founder of Gianna, a Catholic health care center in New York City, said, "In the area of attacks on human life, such as contraception and abortion, it is doctors who are providing these things. I believe it is doctors who must provide effective and fruitful alternatives." Mielnik begins with the premise that authentic fertility care is not simply about achieving the goal of pregnancy. Instead, she believes, it involves providing healing and treatment for the whole person. "Infertility is one of the most painful conditions a person can experience," said Mielnik. "I am here to share their struggle – to offer hope based on doing something right and good for them. As a doctor, this brings tremendous satisfaction."

Mielnik explains that her clinic, which counts the K of C Supreme Council among its supporters, does not use different medication or surgeries than other fertility clinics. Rather, it is the philosophy of respecting and restoring the natural rhythms of fertility that makes the difference. "The Church's understanding of the person has led to better medicine and more effective treatment of the problem of infertility," said Mielnik. "If it weren't for the Knights of Columbus and other donors, we wouldn't be here. I am so grateful to them and to the moral support we receive from Archbishop (Timothy) Dolan (of New York)."

A Natural Approach

The couples who see doctors such as Mielnik and Vera are grateful for their holistic, pro-life perspective. Rather than simply applying a technological solution to the problem of infertility, the care provided by clinics such as Gianna attempts to be a truly human, compassionate response. This includes accompanying the couple in their suffering and allowing them to express their faith in the context of treatment. Furthermore, patient care does not end if a couple cannot conceive. In this situation, doctors help the couple transition to mourning and grief.

Lisa Maxson experienced this kind of care from physicians like Dr. Catherine Keefe, who is a graduate of the fellowship program at the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction, founded in Omaha by Dr. Thomas Hilgers in 1985. Hilgers, a member of St. John Vianney Council 7740, developed the Creighton method of NFP as well as natural procreative (NaPro) technology, which is used by doctors to diagnose and treat infertility. "I liked the natural approach these doctors took," Lisa said. "I knew I wouldn't be given the birth control pill just to cover my symptoms. It was also a relief knowing that I would not have to undergo very invasive procedures as is done with IVF, and we wouldn't be paying money to 'get' a baby. The doctors were there first to look at my health and underlying issues."

After her treatments at the institute, Lisa began seeing Dr. Keefe for further consultations. She recalled walking through the clinic and noting that there were crucifixes in each room. It was also common for staff and nurses to pray with her. "I never felt I was just another patient," Lisa said. Around the time of the Maxsons' first wedding anniversary, a laparoscopy confirmed a diagnosis of endometriosis. Lisa then underwent surgery to remove scar tissue that was impeding ovulation and was given ovary stimulation medicine so as to increase her chances of conception. "It is so difficult when all your friends are getting pregnant," she said. "It seemed when we were trying that everyone else was having babies." Still, the Maxsons put their faith in God and trusted that they were receiving the best medical care. "As a couple, it is important to realize that a child is a gift and not simply a right just because you are married," Lisa said. A year and a half after her surgery, Lisa eventually conceived. Keefe and her staff were delighted by the news, and the Maxsons are awaiting the arrival of their first baby in late January. "They were truly hoping we would be able to conceive, accompanying us when we did not and rejoicing with us when we finally did," Lisa said.

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Colleen Rouleau writes from Edmonton, Alberta

The Catholic Information Service booklet titled *The Child: Begotten Not Manmade* provides more information about the Catholic teaching on in vitro fertilization. It is part of the Veritas Series and available free in PDF format at kofc.org/cis. You may also request a free copy by writing to cis@kofc.org or CIS, PO Box 1971, New Haven, CT 06521-1971.

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