

Embryo Adoption Becoming Popular Option for Infertile

As battles over stem-cell research rage, pro-life couples are calling the adoption method a 'noble' choice

As the battle over federal funding for stem-cell research intensifies, some Christians are using leftover embryos for what they say is a more noble cause.

Adoption of embryos-the earliest stage of fetal development-from people who have gone through in vitro fertilization (IVF) and have spare embryos is now a popular choice for infertile couples who believe in the sanctity of life and want to experience the joys of pregnancy.

Doni and Jim Brinkman of Phoenix had their son Tanner after adopting an embryo through Snowflakes, a branch of Nightlight Christian Adoptions agency, located in Fullerton, Calif. "I always wanted a big family, so when we discovered Jim was infertile in 1996, we were devastated," Doni Brinkman said. "We dabbled with different options, but when I heard about embryo adoption on Focus on the Family in 1999, it seemed like the perfect thing for me to do."

The process involves adopting several embryos and implanting two or three at a time in a woman's womb. After completing a home study with Snowflakes, the Brinkmans adopted 11 embryos in February 2000. Doni started carrying two embryos that August but lost one after seven weeks. In May 2001, she gave birth to Tanner, a mischievous redhead with brilliant blue eyes.

"There are no words to describe the miracle that he is, even down to his hair color," Doni Brinkman said. "I always dreamed of having a redhead, but it seemed impossible because I'm very dark-haired and so is my husband."

Doni lost the other nine embryos after three successive tries. Still determined to have a large family, the Brinkmans tried traditional adoption. The first two times the birth mothers backed out, but the third time the couple experienced a "second miracle," when their son Ty Jordan joined the family.

Snowflakes program director Lori Maze said Nightlight started embryonic adoptions in 1997 when the agency's Christian owner recognized that couples with extra embryos from IVF treatments had two options: stem-cell research or thawing.

"We've learned by listening to clients that families who see life as sacred and have extra embryos feel guilty and/or responsible, while those who don't see embryos as life [at that point] still want to help another couple start a family," Maze said.

Snowflakes charges \$6,600 for embryo adoption and implantation. Shipping and blood work is extra. Since 1997, roughly 151 families have adopted embryos through Snowflakes; 88 babies have been born and 11 more are on the way. Maze said the live birth rate of implanted embryos adopted through Snowflakes is 37 percent.

Although half of all American fertility clinics allow their clients to donate their embryos to other couples, only a handful of adoption agencies give clients the option of adopting an embryo. There are no adoption laws in place yet

for embryos, but the agencies that do it have legal papers drawn up for the transfer of ownership. Donors and adoptive parents have three choices-anonymous donation, anonymous adoption and known adoption, in which both sides meet each other.

Diahn Oakley, public relations manager for the National Embryo Adoption Center in Knoxville, Tenn., said the center suggests that donors and adopting families live at least 500 miles apart. "If they live in the same town, a donor might think a child they see on the sidewalk looks like them and wonder if he came from one of their embryos a few years earlier."

The center, located within Knoxville Baptist Hospital for Women, started in May 2004 through federal funding and donations from the Christian Medical Association. Clients have come from 48 states and four countries to the one-stop shop, where couples can fill out the paperwork and have their embryo transfers done on-site by a fertility specialist. The package, including studies and legal documents drawn up by an outside adoption agency, costs \$5,000.

Bonnie Bernard, a professional counselor and executive director of Embryos Alive, an embryo adoption program in Cincinnati, said emotional attachment to the embryos can happen the same way it does with traditional adoptions. "So far, we've only had one couple who have chosen to re-adopt their embryos," Bernard said.

According to the latest statistics available from the American Society of Reproductive Medicine, in April 2002 there were 400,000 frozen embryos in fertility clinics across the ,250, or 2 percent of them, were available for donation or adoption.

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