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Acupuncture alternative

COUPLES TRY ANCIENT TREATMENT FOR INFERTILITY

By CLOE CABRERA • The Tampa Tribune
Tribune photos by VICTOR JUNCO

After a failed attempt at in vitro fertilization, an unsuccessful frozen embryo transfer and other fertility treatments, Caren Harvey and her husband, Paul, were emotionally, physically and financially exhausted.

Three years earlier, fertility treatments and surgery had made the couple's dream of having a baby a reality. Perhaps, they decided, a second child was not to be.

"We were devastated," says Harvey, 38, of her last unsuccessful attempt at a frozen embryo transfer. "Do we give up? What do we do? Do we just embrace our one baby and be happy, or do we try for another child and continue to torture ourselves?"

The Harveys decided to try once more. But this time, they used an ancient Chinese medical procedure as part of their treatment. They credit the birth of their second daughter, Brooke Judith, born in January 2007, to acupuncture — at least in part.

"We thought it was a little quirky at first," recalls Harvey. "I'm a nurse, so this felt very odd to me. Western medicine is very traditional; then you walk into an office, and this beautiful soft music is playing and she's looking at my tongue and telling me what [my body] is lacking. I know it [acupuncture] made a dramatic change. I really wish I had done this before I tried anything else."

Acupuncture has been used in the United States for decades to treat ailments such as headaches, allergies and arthritis. An acupuncturist inserts tiny needles into various points on the body to stimulate energy flow or "Qi" (chee) to improve circulation and reduce stress.

Western doctors have been warming to the idea of fertility acupuncture for several years, since studies have hinted at its benefits, especially when coupled with fertility treatments such as in vitro fertilization. A small German study in 2002 found that performing acupuncture 25 minutes before

and 25 minutes after an embryo transfer increases pregnancy rates to 42.5 percent, compared to about 26 percent without acupuncture.

More recently, a scientific review published in the British Medical Journal suggests that acupuncture may improve a woman's odds of conceiving if done right before or after in vitro fertilization. IVF involves mixing sperm and eggs in a lab dish and creating an embryo that is then placed in the womb. The research found the odds of conceiving went up about 65 percent for women given acupuncture.

Carolyn Huffman, owner of Huffman Wellness in South Tampa, is excited about what she's seeing in the studies. She has treated patients with acupuncture for more than 20 years. More than 50 percent of her practice is related to fertility.

"When I got my acupuncture degree in 1991, it wasn't even being thought of as an option for fertility," says Huffman, who was Harvey's acupuncturist. "In the last decade, acupuncture has become a viable treatment for infertility. It's become more accepted."

The procedure involves a lot more than just inserting a needle, Huffman says. Since the body and the mind are so intricately intertwined, the patient's overall health must be assessed, which includes a complete physical and emotional workup.

In Chinese medicine, a significant part of diagnosis requires examining a patient's tongue and palpating the pulse. The color of

Clockwise from left: Acupuncturist Carolyn Huffman demonstrates her fertility treatment with former fertility patient Erika Deschodt; Caren Harvey holds daughter Brook Judith, whose birth Harvey partially credits to acupuncture; Brook Judith, relaxes in October with Deschodt's son Matthew; and Deschodt holds Matthew. "It was so worth it," Deschodt says of her treatment.



ditions of the bodily fluids and digestive state.

"Everyone's plan isn't going to be the same," Huffman says. "One person can be deficient; another can be excessive. It's specific to the need and pattern of the imbalance."

Huffman says she needs at least three months to treat her patients for infertility, because that's how long it takes egg follicles to form in the body.

Acupuncture is not going to help a woman get pregnant if her problem stems from something that needs surgical correction, such as a blockage in her fallopian tubes. But it can help some women, because it improves circulation to the ovaries — which makes for healthier eggs — and to the uterus, which increases the chances the lining will be strong enough to hold those eggs to full term, says Yangchong Ou, an acupuncturist at the Integrative Medicine Center in North Tampa.

Acupuncture also can be a stress reliever during a very emotional time.

"Acupuncture really helps a woman relax," Ou says. "There is a lot of stress doing IVF. It costs a lot of money. There are lots of drugs and lots of visits to the doctor's office. That causes a lot of stress and anxiety. Acupuncture can make the patient more relaxed and improve the chances of getting pregnant."

Ou says his practice has begun to see a lot more referrals from traditional fertility specialists.

"Acupuncture works best for unexplained infertility issues, when the doctors check everything and cannot find a reason for it," he says. "We look at all of the tests they've done before we treat them. The goal is to address all of the underlying issues to make the woman healthier and, therefore, more able to conceive."

But some doctors caution against making too much of studies that say acupuncture can help with having babies.

While the existing studies have yielded good information, there still isn't sufficient evidence or a study broad enough to call acupuncture a proven remedy for infertility, says Samuel Tarantino, a board-certified reproductive endocrinologist with the Reproductive Medicine Group in Tampa.

"With acupuncture, it appears there may be some placebo effect," Tarantino says. "In my mind, if a patient believes it will work, it will work because of that. The brain has an intense power to heal itself. There are a lot of theoretical positives, but not enough studies to say this is better."

At the very least, "there is absolutely nothing to show that it's harmful if it's done with a trained and appropriately skilled acupuncturist," Tarantino says.

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"If a patient believes in it, there won't be any harm doing it. It's controversial, but it doesn't appear to have any controversial effects."

Erika Deschodt is a believer.

She tried acupuncture for the first time after suffering a miscarriage and trying, unsuccessfully, to conceive for two years.

"Everything was normal, but we didn't get pregnant," says Deschodt, 34, of Tampa. "I didn't want to do in vitro. I wanted to try a natural method like acupuncture."

In 2006, she sought out Huffman, who changed her diet completely. Huffman told her to wipe out all caffeine, stop the morning bagels and eat oatmeal, eggs, tea and other warm foods. Deschodt also started taking herbal supplements, vitamins, royal jelly and omega-3 fatty acids.

Deschodt spent an hour or two each week lying on

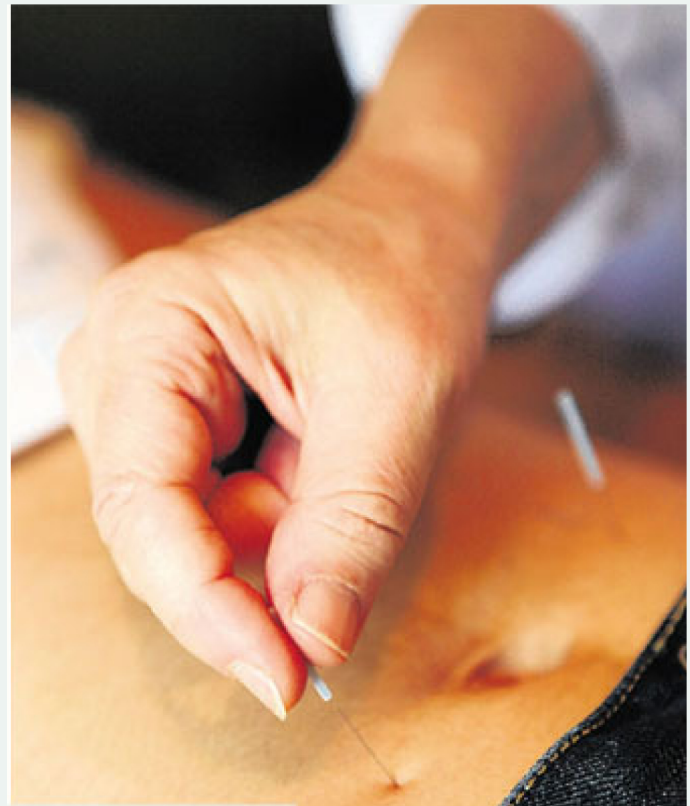
a massage table listening to classical music with needles in her ribs, wrists, ankles, abdomen and ears.

The first time Huffman put on the tape and did the acupuncture, "I felt so relieved I started crying when it was over. And it didn't hurt at all. After two months, I felt great. I told my husband we were going to have a have a baby. I knew we were."

Then, it happened. Seemingly by chance, Deschodt got pregnant exactly three months after starting her acupuncture treatments. And she continued the treatments for an additional three months after conception.

Her son, Matthew Alexander, is almost a year old.

"I really believe it was the acupuncture," she says. "I tell everyone to try this before in vitro. It will help you feel better, it's not expensive and it's natural. I would fall asleep many times while I was there. It was so relaxing, I couldn't move. We're not trying [to get pregnant] now, but when we do, we will try acupuncture again. It was so worth it."



What should you do if you're interested in pursuing acupuncture as a treatment for infertility?

First, see a traditional fertility specialist to see what your underlying fertility issues are.

Make sure your acupuncturist is trained and licensed and has a lot of experience. Try to get a referral from your fertility doctor to a reputable acupuncturist who may be affiliated with a major medical center. Or, get a referral from a friend who has had a positive experience with an acupuncturist.

Insurance usually doesn't cover the cost of acupuncture. One treatment can cost anywhere from \$75 to \$90.

Huffman Wellness will host an educational fertility forum at 7:30 p.m. April 23 at 4721 W. Kensington Ave., Tampa. The event is free and open to the public. For information, call (813) 831-6080.

Cloe Cabrera