

Doctor offers better chance for would-be new moms

Mississauga MD donates fertility treatments to a lucky few

for Mother's Day

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For some women, the best gift for Mother's Day this Sunday would be to become a mother.

To help some of them, a Mississauga doctor is offering his patients free in vitro fertilization (IVF) this weekend to protest the fact treatments are not covered by OHIP and not regulated, so doctors can charge as much as patients are willing to pay. The treatment usually costs \$7,000 each. Mother's Day "is another sad reminder of how elusive motherhood is for many women," said Dr. Essam Michael of Astra Fertility Clinic. "After years of being emotionally battered, to clobber them with a financial burden is despicable."

The government doesn't consider infertility to be a medical problem but "it's ridiculous to say that," he said. "Patients didn't choose to have problems that prevent them from conceiving. The average person will mortgage their house to try it once then they have to stop. Only the wealthy can get it. I believe it's a right for women who can't have a child."

Each IVF treatment, which involves removing a woman's eggs, fertilizing them with sperm and re-implanting them in the womb, costs about \$7,000. There is also another \$2,000 to \$3,000 to pay for the fertility drugs they must take which also aren't covered by OHIP.

Some IVF procedures were covered up until 1993 when the Royal Commission on Reproductive Technologies recommended that Ontario fund it only for women with blocked fallopian tubes.

But Michael says that's unfair because there are many causes of infertility in both men and women. And many doctors charge even more for the treatment because "it's an open market," he said.

Michael will perform the treatment free on four patients this weekend — the timing of the procedure is so precise others didn't qualify — and in the future plans to offer one free treatment every month.

Thirty-five-year-old Romina Izzo of Mississauga estimates she has spent \$5,000 over the past five years on fertility treatments, even though her drugs are covered by her employer's health plan.

If they weren't, "I wouldn't be able to do this," she said. "To get this gift on Mother's Day is a real bonus. It's a real break financially and emotionally.

"I don't understand why the government isn't helping — we don't choose to be in this situation," she said. "Why should the cost of treatment prevent you from having a child? It's not like I'm going in for plastic surgery."

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As well as the cost, too many women are told by private fertility clinics that IVF is their only hope of getting pregnant without getting a proper diagnosis about why they can't get pregnant, Michael said.

"Strict criteria should be set down before a patient is sent for IVF," he said. "You just can't begin it because a patient has been trying to get pregnant for a year. Is it the right choice? Probably not."

The treatments are a fraction of the cost of treating many other illnesses, he said, "and we should promote life. It's very bad in a country like Canada that people can't get pregnant because of a money issue."

He estimates that 9,000 IVF treatments a year are performed in Canada at a cost of about \$45 million. If it was publicly funded, OHIP could set a lower price.

Mary Sami of Brampton, who will turn 42 next week, estimates she has spent \$20,000 over the past five years trying to get pregnant. She is having her third IVF treatment this weekend. Because she lost one of her fallopian tubes after an ectopic pregnancy and the other one is blocked, OHIP is actually covering half the cost of her treatment but the drugs are "very, very expensive," she said. "One little vial cost \$1,100."

When she learned this week she was going to get a free treatment, "it came as wonderful shock," she said. "There are many women like myself who can't afford it and had to give up."



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