

## MAKING BABIES

In 1978, the world's first test-tube baby was born. (She was named Louise Joy Brown.) At the time, in vitro fertilization (IVF) was experimental and revolutionary, and the event was a historic first for fertility medicine. And yet, what is being done today in the same field of medicine would have still been the stuff of science fiction several decades ago. What has remained constant (since even before 1978) is that women's biological clocks keep ticking.

"We're not aware of any mechanism that slows down the reproductive arena, and so unfortunately the quality of a woman's eggs still declines with time," says Dr. Richard Buyalos. In clinics like Fertility and Surgical Associates of California in Thousand Oaks, fertility specialists like Buyalos use modern technology to link molecular genetics with clinical medicine. His area of practice is expanding rapidly, he believes, because there is much more awareness about the decline of fertility potential with age.

The irony, says Buyalos, is that society, at least in urban areas, is nudging back the average age of initiating a family (or starting a second family). "Inevitably, when some couples pursue fertility later in life they won't be able to achieve a viable pregnancy with the woman's own eggs. Probably 20 to 25 percent of the people we see are using a third-party donor. They use eggs harvested from a third party."

So far, fertility medicine has been able to successfully freeze sperm and fertilized eggs for future use, and Buyalos believes a third alternative is close at hand: "I think more emphasis will be on unfertilized eggs that can be harvested and preserved. This will allow healthy eggs to be taken from an earlier time in the mother's life, which won't have the genetic issues of a woman who is older. But we're not quite there yet."

As that technology continues to be refined, other advances—like screening embryos for sickle cell and life-shortening conditions like Huntington's disease before they are transferred to the patient—are already in place. At first, all this science may sound clinical and detached, but ultimately, fertility specialists know their work is for the family. They focus on ensuring the best-quality care because pursuing fertility is an emotional, financial, and time commitment (and that's before the kid is born). ■

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