

# To Leave No Stone Unturned

We were married in 1982 both aged 30. We had discussed our timing regarding when to start a family. The decision as to how long to wait was based on our age plus I had a medical condition dating back to the early 1970's.

Although my specialist had reassured us that the side effects of the medication were minimal, I had decided I wanted a drug free pregnancy. Approximately six months after we were married I was finally weaned off my medication. My specialist had advised that if after six to nine months I wasn't pregnant that we should start to seek help. The condition I have is not a gynaecological problem, totally unrelated, but I had been on high doses of medication including steroids over the years. Perhaps 12 months passed and we then arranged for a referral to a gynaecologist. At this point we started living with a thermometer within easy reach. As time passed and nothing happened he decided to do a laparoscopy and a D&C and gave us the good news that everything was okay. There appeared no apparent reason for me not being pregnant. He then referred us to an IVF specialist. More tests followed with the answer still being the same, everything appears okay. There is no reason why you are not pregnant.

Before long I started developing stomach pain and was advised by our gynaecologist to return to my specialist for a check up before we proceeded any further. Two years later, four major and many minor operations for my previous illness plus a lot of recovery time we were ready, after being given the all clear to once again try for a baby.

Feeling well and convinced that my illness had an effect on my not getting pregnant, I returned to the gynaecologist for a check up. He advised us to keep trying but had placed us on the IVF program as he had felt my chances of falling naturally after what I had been through were very small. Knowing that everything was in working order we felt that getting pregnant shouldn't be too much of a problem!!! Little did we know what we were about to embark on.

Our turn came and the early mornings began. I don't remember how many attempts we had. We always made it to transfer with usually three embryos. I never produced many eggs. From memory maybe four one time, but it was usually three and they would all fertilise. After a few attempts at KGV the gynaecologist suggested that we try the SIVF program (he had in fact placed our name on the list). One attempt here was enough!! Financially a very expensive exercise, I also didn't produce many eggs and only one fertilised. The pain I experienced during the pick up was unbelievable despite the fact the I had been given pethadine to help me.

We had a break at this point to recuperate and to try and decide whether we would continue. We discussed the attempt with our gynaecologist and talked about our options. He felt he had done all he could for us and referred us to another clinic. We had several attempts and got involved with the support group, which was great.

In December 1992 at the age of 40 we decided to have one last attempt. We collected, yet again, three eggs and ended up with three embryos. Two were implanted and the third stored with a view to have it transferred during the following year if this attempt was unsuccessful. It was, but we had our frozen embryo.

In the January I had a pap smear which showed abnormal cells but nothing specific. I was advised to have another smear in six months. I was on the doorstep waiting. The second showed the same. I wasn't having any problems. Periods were normal, no abnormal bleeding. Mid July I sat down to rest after washing up and just before heading off to a meeting and the bleeding started. Horrified as to the amount and length of time we were naturally concerned. Had I, after all this time, fallen pregnant and miscarried, or was there something else wrong? I phoned the surgery and made an appointment for the following day. By this time the bleeding had subsided and was only spotting. It was suggested that a D&C might help, and it didn't appear that I had been pregnant.

Following a biopsy I was diagnosed with cervical cancer, and had to have a radical hysterectomy. Fortunately the report was that the cancer had not spread. I was alive with a wonderful family and the main thing now was to get well again. I returned to work and eventually to thoughts of our frozen

embryo. My yearly checkups were okay and we were finally prompted by a letter from the clinic asking for instructions about the embryo.

We made an appointment to speak to the counsellor as we were now in a position of not being able to use the embryo but at the same time it is ours and we didn't want to give it up. We felt that surrogacy was our only option. Our only hope seemed to be if we had a family member who would be able to carry the embryo but it would have to go before an ethics committee for approval.

I come from quite a large family. My sister who would not have hesitated to say yes had, after her fifth child, had a hysterectomy. My two younger sisters had young families. My youngest sister had always said that if she had finished her family she would not hesitate to have a child for us. That was before she had her girls and pregnancies that weren't easy. She now feels that she would have a problem giving up a child she would have carried. I thanked her for her honesty but had decided I could not put her through another pregnancy. Finally our hope was our sister in law in Canberra.

Canberra had approved surrogacy. After speaking to my brother and his wife, they spoke to their grown up children - 17 & 19 at the time. My niece was very keen and thought her mother should do it, my brother said he would bring her tea and toast in the morning as she had always suffered from morning sickness. We spent a year talking about it and what it would mean. My sister ringing to ask questions she had thought of. Many discussions as to how we would feel if she couldn't do it for us. How she would feel if she did. She loves and has worked with children since she left school and is a very favourite aunt with all the little ones, she becomes very attached. Finally in 1998 she told us she felt she couldn't do it. She was concerned about her own health and had not been well. The following year she finally had a hysterectomy after suffering with fibroids for many years. There unfortunately, ended our hope of having a family member. We have some younger members who volunteered (my nieces) but they are in their mid 20's (ideal age maybe) but one has not had any children and the other also had problem pregnancies.

We have now decided it is time to try and make a decision regarding our embryo. It has now been seven years since I was diagnosed with cancer and as we are now a little older and before we get too much older have decided to once again bring up the subject of surrogacy. Things haven't changed since we last spoke to our counsellor. We have to have our own surrogate and we do not have one. At this stage we hope to find someone who would be willing. We realise our chances are not great with only one embryo which makes it all the harder asking someone to go through the lengthy process involved.

There is of course much more to this story - there is the heartache of each failed attempt that has been written about by others, the decision trying to decide whether to remain childless or adopt, the questions from people who don't understand, the people who do understand and give so much love and support (friends, doctors, clinic staff) and don't mind you crying on their shoulder every time something goes wrong, and more importantly - the husband who is always there, no matter what, supporting and willing to continue, understanding how much it means to have a child but at the same time reassuring me that if it doesn't happen he will always be there.

This is our story.

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