

Israeli study proves hypnosis can double IVF success rate

By David Brinn August 22, 2004

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If Israeli professor Eliahu Levitas has his way, women undergoing IVF treatment will all have the benefit of a hypnotist at their bedside.

According to Levitas's team from Soroka Hospital in Beersheva, hypnosis can double the success of IVF treatment. Levitas's study of 185 women found that 28% of women in the group who were hypnotized became pregnant, compared with 14% of those who were not.

6.1 million American women and their partners experience infertility, according to the American Society of Reproductive Medicine. Of those about 5% choose in-vitro fertilization treatment.

IVF is a method of assisted reproduction in which the man's sperm and the woman's egg (oocyte) are combined in a laboratory dish, where fertilization occurs. The resulting embryo is then transferred to the uterus to develop naturally. Usually, two to four embryos are transferred with each cycle.

According to the latest statistics, the success rate for IVF is similar to the 20% chance that a healthy, reproductively normal couple has of achieving a pregnancy that results in a live born baby in any given month. IVF was successfully used for the first time in the United States in 1981. Since then, more than 114,000 babies in the US have been born as a result of the technique.

The Israeli study – the first of its kind – was presented last month by Levitas to the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology conference in Berlin. According to Levitas, the findings will be published shortly in an American medical journal.

The Israeli researchers were looking to see if hypnosis could make the embryo transfer stage of IVF more successful.

"We gave hypnosis to a group of our patients during the most stressful part of IVF treatment – the transferring of embryos into the uterus," Levitas told ISRAEL21c. "It's a crucial point of the treatment, and the point in which the embryos comes in contact with the womb of the woman. It all builds up to that special moment, which is not very painful but is very stressful."

According to Levitas, that stress can cause complications during the transfer that can put the procedure at risk.

"Studies have been done before which claim that during this short period, there's so much stress in the woman's body that it may induce contractions, albeit tiny ones, which may interrupt or even expel the embryos from the uterus at the same moment we're introducing them," he said.

"Other techniques have been employed like relaxants and tranquilizers, but nothing has worked well. On the other hand, hypnosis has been known for many years for producing central relaxation, and has even been used before surgical interventions to calm patients," said Levitas.

Women undergoing IVF were assessed to see if they were suitable to be hypnotized.

"Those women that were interested signed a consent form and underwent hypnosis by Soroka's Dr. Aldo Parmet, a gynecologist who's licensed to perform hypnosis. All the patients were interviewed prior and Dr. Parmet established which patients were more likely to be hypnotized," said Levitas.

Eighty-nine women were then given hypnosis while their embryos were implanted. Some underwent more than one cycle of IVF treatment. Ninety-six other women underwent embryo transfers without hypnosis. All received one cycle each.

The results showed that the hypnotized women resulted in double the amount of pregnancies of those that weren't hypnotized.

"Performing embryo transfer under hypnosis may significantly contribute to an increased clinical pregnancy rate," Levitas told the conference in Berlin.

Given logistical and financial constraints, Levitas sees no reason why hypnotism shouldn't be an option for all woman undergoing IVF treatment, and he hopes the publication of the Soroka study will raise enough interest to spark continued investigations of the approach.

"The bottom line is I think it's a good thing, it will work. Patients should be given the option if the facilities are available."