Scholars Academic Journal of Biosciences (SAJB) **ISSN 2321-6883 (Online)**
Sch. Acad. J. Biosci., 2016; 4(4A):328-331 **ISSN 2347-9515 (Print)**

(An International Publisher for Academic and Scientific Resources)
www.saspublishers.com DOI : 10.36347/sajb.2016.v04i04.005

Review Article

Infertility in The Philippines and Natural Procreative (Napro) Technology: A Commentary

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Abstract: The latest retrievable data about infertility in the Philippines was made available to the public by Merck Serono, a private pharmaceutical company who commissioned the survey in 2011. The survey was conducted by Synovate in 100 participating households in the Philippines, particularly in key cities located in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. The survey results revealed that one out of ten Filipino couples are suffering from infertility. And these couples are not seeking treatment due to the following reasons: (1) financial constraints; (2) time constraints; and (3) the patient's belief. Of all these, financial constraints, at 86%, is the primary reason why infertile couples are not seeking treatment. In addition to this data, the Chief of The Medical City's Reproductive Medicine, Infertility and Gynecologic Endoscopy, Dr. Marc Anthony Ancheta, further reveals that "some 35 to 40% of a couple's inablity to conceive a child are due to female factors; while the other 35 to 40% could be attributed to male factors." While male factor infertility is also deserving of proper attention, it is the female factor infertility that should receive greater attention and focus in terms of treatment. Why? Because, primarily, the female's reproductive cycle is very complex and would need months and/or years to partially identify the underlying reason/s of infertility; and second, the female's ability to conceive naturally will fall by 50% when she reached the age of 35. Therefore, there should be urgency in treating female factor infertility in an efficient, ethical and affordable way. And these conditions can be achieved by the use of NaPro Technology.
Keywords: infertility, Philippines, financial constraints.

COMMENTARY

Infertility is the inability of couples, under the reproductive years, to conceive after one (1) year of unprotected coitus. The World Health organization or WHO classify infertility as a disease affecting millions of couples around the globe. According to a WHO data published in 2004, the occurence of infertility among ever-married women in developing countries, which includes the Philippines, is one out of four couples translating to about 186 million women. Unfortunately, this rate "hardly changed over the past 20 years [8]."

Economic Dilemma due to Infertility

The recent data (2012) from the National Statistical Coordination Board under the office of the Philippine Statistics Authority reveals that the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in the Philippines "decreased from 7.2 in 1960 to 3.1 in 2010.[7]" Meaning, the average number of Children that will be born by a Filipino woman throughout her lifetime is 3.1 or 3. Considering the decreasing trend in the country's fertility rate; the implementation of the Reproductive Health Law, where population control is being emphasized; and the consistent rate of infertility affecting couples, it is interesting to note that the possibility of a "demographic winter" or population decline might soon be realized in the Philippines. And this, unfortunately, has a far reaching implications in the country's economic growth.

Marital Dilemma due to Infertility

The purpose of marriage is to create a family – complete with a child or children. For this reason, it is an agonizing experience if couples are unable to achieve this purpose. Recent studies about the impact of infertility among married couples show divorce and/or separation are the top repercussions. To protect marriage, which the Philippine Constitution holds sacred, adopting NaPro Technology as the Government's national policy to cure infertility is very much needed.

Ethical Dilemma of Assisted Reproductive Technology as tool to overcome infertility

It is a medical and biological fact that human life begins at fertilization, the meeting of the male's sperm cell and the female's egg cell. Thus, any forms of action, with or without the aid of technology, that will destroy the fertilized egg cell (embryo) is immoral. Today, the most popular approach to "overcome"

infertility is through Assisted Reproductive Technology or ART, where "in vitro" fertilization can be classified. While this technology can promise, and/or sometimes, provide good and instant results for those couples wanting to have offspring/s, it cannot diminish the fact that ART defies some ethical boundaries, particularly in the destruction and the storage of unused embryos. Since the Philippines is a pre-dominantly Christian Nation, an effective technology (e.g. NaPro Technology) that will treat infertility and, at the same time, uphold the dignity of human life is much appropriate and needed.

Looking at the recent infertility study in the Philippines conducted by Synovate for the pharmaceutical group Merck Serono in 2011, there is one out of ten Filipino couples suffering from infertility. And among these couples, 86% are not seeking treatment due to financial reasons.

Considering the rate of infertility in the Philippines and the rate of Filipino couples who cannot afford to undergo treatment, it is disturbing that the government is not giving much attention to this problem. Notwithstanding the fact that the recently passed Reproductive Health (RH) Law inlvolves, under Section 4 (q), “prevention, treatment and management of infertility and sexual dysfunction” as vital elements of an effective reproductive health care. In addition to this, the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) for the said law did not identify a comprehensive plan to alleviate the sufferings of Filipino couples from infertility. Such is understandable if the only option for the government to address this problem is thru Assisted Reproductive Technology or ART, which cost hundreds of thousands of pesos. Hence, on a budgetary perspective, not a practical and economical solution.

Talking about options and solutions, a natural and restorative approach to infertility in the name of Natural Procreative (NaPro) Technology is gaining popularity in countries such as the United Sates, Ireland, England, New Zealand, Canada, and Mexico. Not just because of its affordability but, more so, of its medical efficiency and ethical soundness.

To give you a brief history, it was the discovery of the Creighton Model FertilityCare System (CrMS) by Dr. Thomas W. Hilgers in 1976, that paved way to this new science called Natural Procreative (NaPro) Technology. The development of NaPro Technology took almost 30 years of extensive and intensive research on women’s reproductive cycle. In fact, it was only in 2004 that Dr. Hilgers self-published a reference book called, “The Medical and Surgical Practice of NaProTECHNOLOGY.”

Efficiency of NaPro Technology

The statistical data “shows that a NaPro Technology approach for women who have anovulatory infertility, polycystic ovarian disease, endometriosis, or tubal occlusion, all have statistically significantly higher pregnancy rates than patients with similar conditions treated with Assisted Reproductive Technology, particularly *in vitro* fertilization (IVF)” [1].

And these 2004 data slighly coincide with theYear 2008 findings about NaPro Technology where “75% of couples had live births with NaPro conceived within 12 months and 93% of couples conceived within 18 months.” (Stanford 2008) Furthermore, a published data in 2013 reveals that patients “treated with NaPro Technology infertility protocols, more than 60% became pregnant within 24 months and nearly 70% within 36 months.” [2].

Affordability of NaPro Technology

According to the website of some infertility clinics in the United States, the cost of IVF is ranging from $10,000 to $15,000 just for ONE cyle. And to make the burden even more burdensome, IVF are not covered by medical insurance or health plan. In short, all expenses are shouldered by the couples. If converted to Philippine Peso using the current rate of Php 46.75 per $1.00, IVF costs around Php 467,500 to Php 701,250. This price range is true since the author, in 2015, inquired to some prominent hospitals in the Philippines and was given a price range similar to the mentioned figures.

In contrast, the cost for NaPro Technology (worse case), according to their official Philippine website, is Php. 30,000 to 80,000. And this includes ALL - consultation, medicine, minor surgeries, etc - for the whole 1-year duration of the treatment.

Ethical Acceptability of NaPro Technology

As previously mentioned, ART is the most common and most available technique to "overcome," but not cure, infertility. However, numerous ethical issues are hounding this technique, specifically the use of "in vitro" fertilization or IVF. To give you a few background, for purposes of a much profound understanding, the author collatted the following ethical objections raised against IVF:

1. **Harmful and/or destructive effects on the human embryo** - In IVF, "the number of pre-embryos that are transferred to the woman’s uterus is determined by the chances of fertilization, and this varies with the woman’s age. A sufficient number of pre-embryos are needed to increase the likelihood of pregnancy. Those

that are not needed usually are frozen. Embryos that are not transferred to a woman's uterus ultimately may be used for research purposes or destroyed. Embryos in the uterus may be destroyed by selective pregnancy reduction. In these instances further embryonic development has been halted by the action of a physician with the likely consent of the couple" [3]. Since it is a well-established fact that human life begins at fertilization, any actions that will destroy or harm the fertilized egg constitute an infringment to the embryo's right to life; and therefore, unethical. In the Philippines, Article II, Section 12 of the Constitution clearly manifest that the state has the responsibility to "equally protect the life of the mother and the life of the unborn from conception." And the recent Supreme Court decision on the RH Law clearly defined conception as fertilization when it emphasized: "In all, whether it be taken from a plain meaning, or understood under medical parlance, and more importantly, following the intention of the Framers of the Constitution, the undeniable conclusion is that a zygote is a human organism and that the life of a new human being commences at a scientifically well-defined moment of conception, that is, upon fertilization." [4]

2. **Harmful and traumatic effects on the life of the mother** - "The success of IVF depends on the number of embryos transferred to the uterus. Because the chance of survival of an embryo in conventional IVF is small, the more transfers made, the greater the chance of pregnancy. However, this increases the likelihood of multiple pregnancy, with the greatest chance occurring among women younger than age 35 and the least chance among those older than 40. Multiple pregnancy presents a threat to the physical and mental health of the mother. She may suffer from high blood pressure or uterine bleeding or from complications associated with delivery by cesarean section. Accompanying these physical problems are possible emotional difficulties that might be experienced by both the pregnant woman and her male partner. In addition, the couple will have to bear the medical costs of IVF as well as the costs of medical care for their offspring should there be ongoing medical problems" [3]. In addition, "an IVF treatment can have a tremendous impact on women: it is a very demanding physical process, with far-reaching effects on a woman's psychological well-being, her relationship with her partner, and her social environment. Emotions and expectations can run high and the whole process leaves the women exhausted and disheartened, as well as causing rifts in the relationship with her partner and social circle" [5].

In contrast to IVF, NaPro Technology "works cooperatively with the procreative and gynecologic systems. When these systems function abnormally, NaPro Technology IDENTIFIES the problems and cooperates with the menstrual and fertility cycles that CORRECT the condition, maintain the human ecology, and sustain the procreative potential."[6].

CONCLUSIONS AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

1. With high cost and low efficiency rate of IVF, it is best to choose NaPro Technology since recent studies revealed its high efficiency rate and affordability.

2. With all the unethical issues surrounding IVF and its blatant disregard to the sanctity of human life – both the mother and the unborn, it is best that we choose NaPro Technology as the ethical solution to cure infertility because the procedures involved are only meant to restore the normal functions of the reproductive system. Thus, it does not interfere to the natural course of sexual reproduction, eliminating all the ethical concerns raised in IVF.

3. With the alarming rate of infertility in the Philippines, it is best that the government choose NaPro Technology as National Policy to treat infertility. In this way, both the health of the mother and the unborn will be equally respected and protected.

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