

When credit runs out at the sperm bank

IT'S HELLISHLY hard to get hold of frozen sperm these days. I'm sitting in the Lister Hospital—the Dorchester of London hospitals—in the waiting-room of the Assisted Conception Unit. The doctor is running three-quarters of an hour late. I can only console myself with the thought that if I were going for artificial insemination on the National Health I'd probably have to wait months.

I am hoping to get offered some sperm-bank sperm and thus become one of the growing number of single women who are accepted for artificial insemination by donor sperm (AID). At the London Pregnancy Advisory Service nearly a third of the women wanting insemination are single.

I am surrounded by couples in Fertility Clinic Best—there appears to be some sort of etiquette for what you wear to one of these appointments. People dress up. I've gone for radical chic, topped off with a Lenin badge. While other patients read *The Field*, I peruse the unit's in-house magazine—features on cervical hostility, tube blockage and suchlike—and the Lister price list: ovum donation-zift (whatever that is) £1700; embryo freezing £400 (thawing costs extra); artificial insemination donor (per cycle) £315.



A growing number of single women are trying to have children by artificial insemination. In the interests of research, CAROLINE PHILLIPS joins them in the waiting-room

The doctor for whom I'm waiting is called Hosam Abdulla. I wonder whether sperm from a married man counts as adultery? And what about the ethics of frozen sperm from someone who is dead? Those are the sort of questions one needs to put to Him Upstairs.

"Mrs Phillips?" I'm used to being mistaken for a married woman; I can take it like a man. "Yes." The eyes in the waiting-room are turned on me. "Have you brought your husband?" The nurse looks me up and down. It's unlikely I would have, even if I had one—but I think it best to keep it simple: "No."

"Didn't anyone tell you ... you have to bring your husband?" asks the nurse. "To start with, I'm not married," I hear myself saying, with a blush the colour of blood. I'd like to say it was my imagination that everyone looked at me—but it wasn't.

As I walk down the corridor to see Abdulla, I rehearse my script ... with palpitations. I am a high-powered, high-earning career woman of a certain age—a veritable man-free zone—and don't want to end up lonely. I have a supportive family. And I don't want to sleep with someone just for the sake of getting pregnant. Nor trap a man into marriage just because I want a baby. I have already conned my poor doctor into referring me for artificial insemination—so, from his letter, Abdulla must have some idea of what to expect.

Abdulla is effervescent. "I want a baby," I say, weakly.

"I don't think I'll be able to do it," he says. He then launches into a soliloquy: about voluntary guidelines telling doctors not to inseminate members of the unmarried classes, about the Warnock proposals and the possibility that a statutory licensing authority will be set up and close down errant clinics. It appears that he is not prepared to fight a minor battle in such a sensitive year.

"If I were you," says Abdulla, "I'd go to another clinic and lie and say your

husband is abroad or has no sperm or has MS and can't produce a sample—and ask for AID and they will give it to you."

"Can't you do it for me?"—my real wheedling tone, this—"I don't want to run the risk of getting a sexually-transmitted disease, custody battles or any sort of emotional ties. I don't want and don't need a man."

"I don't have any moral arguments against it," he says. "I don't think it's a great idea to bring a child up on your own—but that doesn't mean it's wrong. Besides, what you are doing is far more honourable. You respect yourself and your body more than to get a boyfriend and just sleep with him for a couple of nights and get pregnant."

He apologises for not being able to help me and refuses to charge me for the £60 consultation. "I felt I just needed to talk to you and explain things." He takes my hand in his. "I do hope you become pregnant," he says, thus becoming the first man ever to have said that to me.

It was an embarrassing day in the history of aided conception when my doctor's referral letter arrived on my desk at work. It had been opened in error by another Phillips. "Caroline is wondering about the possibility of artificial insemination so that she can have a child to bring up on her own ..." it read.

Does sperm from a married man count as adultery? What about frozen sperm from someone who is dead?



In consultations, patients may be told that doctors are cautioned against inseminating unmarried women

Next step, the Bridge Fertility Centre at London Bridge Hospital where a Professor Grudzinskas agrees to see me. They also have the biggest sperm bank in the country. And yes, the lady who makes my appointment says, they do impregnate single women.

The first hitch occurs when, the day before my appointment, a Sunday newspaper splashes on a story about sperm-bank mothers with my professor at the centre of the row.

In the event, he keeps me waiting an hour and a half. On an hour for hour basis, he'll owe me money by the time I get to see him. It is

hard not to become exceedingly nervous.

I know I can ask about my sperm donor's characteristics—from hair and eye colour to height and hair type, and choose a donor with musical or athletic leanings. But there have been slip-ups, when white women have given birth to black babies. And what about the inheritance of genetic diseases? And what of a batch of sperm from some genetic stud leading to the possibility

of my child one day marrying another produced from the same donor?

"My legal advisers think that everybody who comes to me seeking advice on conception who is unattached and wishes to conceive by donor insemination should be considered to be, in the first instance, a journalist." Thus Professor Grudzinskas' opening lines as he handed me a copy of the earlier mentioned newspaper article on him.

"So you're not a journalist?" he says, in disbelieving tone, before proceeding to tell me that every woman seeking conception using anonymous donor's sperm is considered independently. "Some consultants are sympathetic, others won't consider it at all. I'm one of the ones who is positive."

The professor is patently unconvinced at my story, but sportingly says that he would have to ascertain how much support from family and GP I had. "The only thing I would need then is an honest broker (his word for a counsellor) to take you through it."

He then whizzes me through a medical questionnaire. "Had any relationships with men?" He sounds quizzical to sympathetic. "Addicted to cigarettes or whisky?" Then he says he has to do an internal examination. If he had

thoughts of exacting revenge, this must be it. To make matters worse I was wearing slate grey knickers that I suspect the Filipino maid used to polish the furniture.

I've told him I work for a public relations company called Prime Communications. I ask him not to contact me there. "Oh, no," he says, "it's just if someone calls me up and asks about you I can say you work for Prime Con."

He starts talking about public outrage and I say that I think that, as a woman, I have a right to do what I like with my body. "That's my prejudice," he says. "But the watchdog and ethics committee is conservative and it is clearly an emotive issue at the moment and the discussions going on in the Press don't help."

I protest that all this is going to get in the way of my having a baby. "I know what I want is an incredibly selfish thing, something I am doing for me." "Not selfish," he replies. "Perfectly normal."

The professor looks weary. "After you have been for a counselling session with an independent counsellor, unless we encounter difficulties there, I expect we shall start treatment."

I ask what sort of therapist she is. "A drama therapist," he replies. Perhaps he doesn't think much of my acting.