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## Austin woman has first baby in Central Texas from frozen egg

By Mary Ann Roser

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Someday Catherine Collins Navarre's parents will tell her that all babies are a blessing but that her birth also owes a big debt to science.

Collins, who goes by her grandmother's maiden name, is the first baby born in Central Texas — and only the second birth to be announced in Texas — from a frozen egg. She arrived May 3, almost a year after a woman in Houston used her own frozen eggs to bear twins on May 28, 2010. The babies are among 1,000 such births worldwide, according to estimates by various groups, but new technology is paving the way for more, said Dr. Kaylen Silverberg, an infertility specialist at Texas Fertility Center in Austin who assisted the Navarre family.

"I think this is going to be an exploding part of our field for women diagnosed with cancer, before they get chemotherapy" and compromise their fertility, Silverberg said. "Or if you have a woman on a career track, she can bank her eggs until she meets Mr. Right."

Freezing eggs is relatively new, more delicate and trickier than freezing embryos — already fertilized eggs — or freezing sperm, which has been done for decades. The American Society for Reproductive Medicine says egg freezing is still considered experimental.

The entire process, from harvesting eggs to implanting them, costs \$18,000 to \$20,000 and is not covered by insurance, Silverberg said.

The chances of a woman successfully having a baby with her own frozen egg varies from 10 percent if she is younger than 32 to 1 percent if she's older than 35, said Dr. Glenn Schattman, president-elect of the Society of Assisted Reproductive Technology. Success rates rise if more eggs are implanted — several usually are — or if an older woman uses donated eggs from a younger woman, he said.

Data on success rates are squishy because small numbers of women have been involved in most studies. Reproductive Biology Associates of Atlanta has developed a faster way of freezing eggs that the Austin fertility group now uses.

The Atlanta company, which reported the first birth from frozen eggs in 1997, says on its website that it has achieved pregnancy rates in excess of 70 percent when eggs from donors ages 21 to 30 are used.

However, if a 37-year-old uses her own eggs, her chance of getting pregnant is 35 percent, which is similar to a normal pregnancy rate for a woman that age, the company said.

"It makes me in awe of everything the human body can do, which is both spiritual and scientific," said Collins' mother, 39-year-old Ellen Navarre, who worked as a lawyer in Austin before Collins and her older brother, Charlie, were born. "It's a gift

that I'm able to have two beautiful, perfect children."

Because Navarre has fertility problems and had trouble getting pregnant after she wed fellow lawyer Michael Navarre in June 2004, the couple went to Silverberg for help. He harvested eggs from Ellen, and they were fertilized with sperm from Michael. A frozen embryo was implanted in Ellen and resulted in Charlie, who was born July 26, 2007.

"We are over-the-moon happy with him," Ellen said. But something was missing.

Ellen and Michael are close to their siblings, so it was important to them that Charlie grow up with a little brother or sister. A second pregnancy, however, was harder than the couple imagined.

Ellen was slightly older and had trouble producing viable eggs. Her sister agreed to donate, and Ellen got pregnant but miscarried.

Silverberg then told them about using frozen eggs from an anonymous donor. Michael's sperm would fertilize the eggs, and the embryos would be implanted into Ellen, with the hope that one would produce a child.

Silverberg said Navarre's case was his office's first try on a patient. A second patient got pregnant, he said, but miscarried.

The new technology is "a total game changer," Silverberg said.

When an egg is slowly frozen to 400 degrees below zero, ice crystals can harm the egg. The membrane can get damaged or burst during thawing and rehydrating, Silverberg said. Pregnancy rates are relatively low for eggs frozen under those conditions. But the quick-freeze process developed in Atlanta essentially freeze-dries the eggs, preventing ice crystals and other harm, Silverberg said.

Navarre said she had a normal pregnancy and both children are "very healthy."

Schattman, who also is an associate professor at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York, said the quick-freezing process involves some toxins, and it is not known at this time whether the long-term health of the children is different than that of other children. He also said that harvesting eggs and implanting them is not without risks, including bleeding or injury to internal organs.

Still, he said, freezing eggs provides important options to women facing chemotherapy and others seeking ways to preserve their fertility. "I think the field is going to grow dramatically," he said.

Navarre said she and her husband wanted to tell their story to help other couples going through similar problems with infertility.

"If it can help someone and give them just a little of the joy it has given us," she said, "it would be so worth it for us."

maroser@statesman.com; 445-3619

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