

ON TOP

ON FERTILE GROUND

Creator of the first ICSI child in South East Asia, and pioneer of the CAT technique of Assisted Reproduction, DR. FIRUZA PAREKH in conversation with SAVIA RAJAGOPAL

What prompted you to start the IVF center in 1989?

The world's first test tube baby was born in '79. This was the time I finished my MBBS. I felt then, that if they could do it abroad, then why not us? Also, the plight of women who could not have a baby affected me because the brunt always fell on them. My husband, a neuro-psychiatrist and I went abroad to learn something new and implement it back here. I started from scratch and it took me a year to set up this facility.

You are credited with creating the first ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection) child in South East Asia.

Yes. Initially, IVF was for women who had blocked tubes. Then the indications expanded. In ICSI, we are bypassing many of the fertilisation steps by injecting the egg with the sperm directly. We had the first ICSI pregnancy in South East Asia in '94. The world's first ICSI baby was in '92 and that has revolutionised the way we treat infertile couples.

What has made assisted reproduction more acceptable to Indian couples?

When I started, there was still some hesitation and infertility had some stigma. Today, couples come happily for treatment. Also, infertility treatment has become very specific and easy. It's technically very feasible and patient-friendly. All these factors are clearing doubts about infertility.

How do you handle informing couples that they may not be able to have a child? Many times couples come to me, and say, 'you are our only hope', which is disturbing as we all have our limitations. I always tell couples that IVF is 40 per cent, while adoption is 100 per cent. In our country, so much of premium is placed on having your own biological baby. It is extremely difficult and heartbreaking as a mother to tell a couple that they will not be able to have a child. I believe adoption is a very viable alternative in our country.

As a woman, you manage a busy and stressful job as well as a home. How do you find the balance?

It was difficult when my children were young. You need a support system in your husband, friends and those who work with you. One learns with time. Also, when children are inculcated to be independent, I think things work out. Right in the beginning, I decided that evenings are time for the family and something that I wouldn't give up for anything in the world.

After IT, BT (Bio-technology) is being hailed as the biggest thing that India has to offer to the world. What role do you foresee for India in the same area?

India should not ape the West. Our strongest point is our genetic diversity in our population, plants and crops. We should see what's applicable to our country. The pharma industry should

concentrate on research on vaccines for malaria, TB, HIV because these could be winners globally. We have already started on two rungs higher than anybody else, which is quite enviable and we should utilise this to our advantage.



Photo: Yogesh Shah