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Help for a national concern

INFERTILITY AWARENESS, A joint venture with the Infertility Awareness Association of Canada

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Infertility Awareness Association of Canada

The statistics may prove surprising, if not downright shocking: One in six Canadian couples faces fertility issues. They either cannot conceive or face great difficulties having children. Up to 250,000 couples across the country know they have a problem but are not seeking help.

"More troubling is the fact that infertility is on the rise," says Jocelyn Smith, president of the Infertility Awareness Association of Canada (IAAC), based in Montreal. "As a nation, dealing with this deeply troubling problem must become a priority. Our very future depends on it."

Raising awareness and providing education and support for people wanting to have children but unable to do so is the mission of the IAAC, founded 25 years ago by Marie Morrissey, a mother unable to find help in her struggle to conceive.

From that modest beginning, it has grown to include 26 support groups across the country, a bilingual quarterly magazine, *Creating Families*, available either through subscription or on various newsstands and at Chapters Indigo bookstores, a Web site that receives 14,000 hits a month (www.iaac.ca) and a range of support material.

"Much of our growth can be credited to the efforts of Dr. Norm Barwin, a co-founder of IAAC. He served on the IAAC board for more than 15 years, mostly as president, and through his vision and steadfast leadership, IAAC flourished," says Bev Hanck, IAAC's executive director.

IAAC has also become an increasingly effective advocate. Its influence was felt in the province of Quebec's recent decision to increase the refundable tax credit for the costs of infertility treatments and medications to 50%, up from its previous level of 30%.

Quebec, however, remains the only province to offer any substantial financial relief to couples seeking treatment.

As Dr. Paul Claman of the Ottawa Fertility Centre notes: "Access to treatment is the biggest struggle facing most infertile men and women in Canada today. Canada and its provinces represent the only jurisdictions in the world with an advanced public medical system that do not cover assisted reproductive technology treatments for those suffering from infertility."

Dr. Claman adds that, "infertility is a medical problem that can be emotionally, socially and financially crippling. We hope that by raising awareness of infertility with the Canadian public, governments will respond with the much-deserved funding of fertility treatments including IVF."

May 18 to 24 is the second annual Canadian Infertility Awareness Week. Created by IAAC, the week will feature a range of local events designed to bring focus and attention to the challenges of Canada's infertile community.

Among the week's highlights will be the attendance of Dr. Robert Edwards at a May 24 seminar at the Radisson Hotel East in Toronto, which is being hosted by IVF Canada.

Dr. Edwards, a Cambridge University research physiologist, in partnership with gynecologist Dr. Patrick Steptoe, pioneered the technique that resulted in the birth of Louise Brown, the world's first so-called test tube baby, 30 years ago. "Since then we have seen some great advances," Ms Hanck says.

"But we have also faced some setbacks."

For example, federal legislation passed in 2004 has resulted in patients not being able to pay donors for sperm or ova, or to pay surrogates.

"The result has been a dramatic shortage of eggs from donors," she says. "Today, ova must come from a 'known' donor, usually a family member." On the plus side, fertility clinics now have a wide range of techniques to

resolve infertility issues, adds Ms. Smith, a registered nurse and administrator at the LifeQuest Centre for Reproduction in Toronto.

"We will need every one of them, plus new ones as well, going forward," she says. "Research is beginning to link environmental factors with a growing incidence of infertility in both sexes."

Statistically, infertility is equally spread among the sexes, Ms. Hanck says, with a third of the cases attributed to the male partner, a third to the female partner and a third to a combination of both.

Yet in the face of a disturbing increase in infertility, Canadian reproductive clinics continue to improve their patients' chances of becoming parents. The Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society says that in 2005, Canadian reproductive clinics performed 8,195 treatments and had an average live birth success rate of 26%. Based on the CFAS statistics, that means more than 2,100 babies born to infertility patients each year - and the number is growing.

Procedures are also becoming safer through the adoption of techniques such as eSET, where a single egg is fertilized in-vitro and then implanted in the mother, instead of the alternative method, where multiple fertilized eggs were used.

However, Ms. Hanck warns that Canada is not seeing sufficient births; the country's total fertility rate is well below replacement (2.1 children per couple) at only 1.5, having fallen to that level by 1995.

"By 2035, Canada will have a further population drop unless provincial and federal governments establish policies that will ensure population growth," she adds.