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The start of life as seen on smartphones



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By Lynne Kelleher

Irish couples attending a Spanish fertility clinic can now watch the first signs of life in their growing embryos on their smartphones or home computer.

More and more Irish mothers are following the trend of older mothers like Bond girl Halle Berry and Nicole Kidman in trying for a baby in their 40s and many are now using egg donation or embryo donation when traditional IVF doesn't work.

The Instituto Marques in Barcelona, which has treated more than 1,000 Irish patients, has a hi-tech incubator called the Embryoscope, which allows couples to watch the embryos in the first days and weeks live on the internet before they are transferred to the womb.

Dr Hans Arce, assisted reproduction consultant at the clinic which specialises in long-standing and unexplained infertility, said Irish patients feel closer to the process of conceiving their baby through the webcam images which were only previously seen by the embryologists working in the laboratory.

He said: "They can see their own embryos 'live' from their smartphone or computer. This has brought treatments closer to them and helps them enjoy them more."

Last year more than two out of three of the 373 Irish women attending the Instituto used eggs donated by young Spanish women in an attempt to conceive a baby.

One in six, or 15%, opted to have a donor embryo while 18% had IVF treatment with their own eggs.

Almost 1,000 Irish women – with an average age of 41 – have flown to Spain in the last five years for egg and embryo donation.

Six out of 10 of the Irish women at the clinic are over the age of 40 but the upper limit for treatment is 50.

Dr Arce said he believes there has been an increase in Irish patients due to a more open attitude to donor eggs and donor embryos but also due to couples in second relationships seeking fertility treatment.

In 2011 and 2012, there were 204 babies born to 374 Irish patients who attended the clinic.

Dr Arce said the numbers of Irish patients opting for embryo donation went from just 6% in 2010 to 15% last year and shows Irish women are willing to carry a donor embryo created from a donor egg and donor sperm.

He said: "I think the attitude is definitely changing. You can see this in our increase in embryo adoption."

He said women are able to have babies later in life now with the possibility of egg donation.

He said: "The average age of our patients is 41 years, but the main reason why there is a drop in fertility in women of this age is due to the quality of the eggs. Once we change these eggs to 25-year-old ones, the success rates sky-rise again. There is a slight increase risk in obstetric pathologies like pre-eclampsia and diabetes. This is why we recommend a more rigorous control during pregnancy."

The treatment at the clinic runs to fees of €10,000 for egg and €3,500 for embryo adoption or donation, and €7,590 for IVF with women's own eggs.

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