Jewish egg donors, recipients face faith-based challenges

By Cara Hogan Advocate Staff

For couples who have tried everything to get pregnant, from in-vitro to fertility drugs, egg donation is often the last attempt in a desperate quest for a child. But it is even tougher for Jewish couples, who face a shortage of Jewish donors and conflicting religious messages.

Judy Weiss, a registered nurse, started the New Jersey-based egg donor agency A Jewish Blessing in 2005 to help Jewish families find exemplary young Jewish donors.

"I know we're generous and like to help others, so why aren't Jewish girls running to donate our eggs?" asked Weiss.

She said that Jewish women are initially reluctant to donate eggs, and that her organization's efforts only resulted in 10 births in 2008. But, she noted, after learning that their gift might help a Jewish couple unable to conceive, potential donors typically change their tune.

"It's like they're helping their family," she said.

The persistent shortage of Jewish egg donors is the result of several factors, including high demand and religious considerations, according to Amy Demma, owner of Prospective Families, an egg donor agency in Wellesley founded in 2006.

"We ask intended parents what they're looking for in a donor and many say religious background and ethnicity is very important to them," said Demma, whose company took part in 51 births in 2008. "For those women whose lifestyle is influenced by particular cultural standards, they are less inclined to choose to be an egg donor. So for Jewish [prospective parents], I encourage them to work with multiple agencies at the same time because of how few Jewish donors there are."

The interpretation of Jewish laws with regard to egg donation can conflict, depending upon the source. Rabbi J. David Bleich is a medical expert on halacha and professor at the Cardozo School of Law, part of Yeshiva University, an Orthodox Jewish school in New York City.

"[Egg donation] is abhorrent," said Bleich. "There's no obligation to do anything other than what comes naturally in order to become parents. That doesn't mean people don't want to become parents and I can empathize, but it doesn't mean I have the right to cut halachic or ethical corners in order to enable them to achieve that."

Bleich said there is a number of serious concerns regarding egg donation, including confusion over maternal identity and a possible unwitting marriage to a half-sibling. The guidelines of the non-religious Society of Reproductive Medicine address this issue, saying that donors should contribute to no more than 10 live births, reducing the small chance that a child would ever meet and procreate with siblings.

Still, Bleich said the procedure crosses the line.

"Halachic rules were designed to preserve procreation within the family," he said. "I try to explain to these people that it's a terrible situation to find yourself in; do everything you can without doing things that are not regarded as immoral in the Jewish value system."

But Rabbi Andy Vogel of Temple Sinai in Brookline, a Reform congregation, disagreed with Bleich's assessment and said that infertility issues must take into account a range of Jewish values.

"I meet lots of people who deal with infertility and I know how deep their sadness is," said Vogel. "Judaism recognizes that if medical technology can provide the opportunity to have children, then that's a blessing.

"In addition to being a Jewish legal issue, it's also an issue of compassion and recognizing the real pain that people experience," he continued. "Thank goodness we have technology that can help, as long as we stay within the boundaries of medical ethics."

In addition to religious considerations, physical and emotional factors also come into play, according to Karin Katz, director of third party reproduction at Boston IVF, a fertility clinic in Waltham. The clinic only deals with the medical side of egg donation and does not match donors to possible parents.

"The donor will have blood tests, genetic testing, a physical and more - it's not an easy process to go through," said Katz. "For the recipient, it's not difficult physically, but mentally you have to come to terms with the fact that you are not using your own gametes anymore. Everyone meets with a social worker and has the option to do therapy."

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the procedure has a roughly 50 percent success rate. Katz said the risk of complications to the donor during egg retrieval is less than 1 percent, and Boston IVF maintains the donor's anonymity and legal separation from the future child. But, she said, it is still difficult to find women willing to give their eggs.

That combination of scarcity and high demand also means that willing Jewish donors stand to make a hefty profit.

"Donors are compensated within the range of $5,000 to $10,000. Anything over $7,000 requires justification," said Prospective Families' Demma. "Often acceptable justification is that a donor is of unique ethnicity and so there is a higher demand. Jewish women do tend to be paid more."

Demma acknowledged that compensation is an obvious motivation for donors, though the organization puts them through extensive screening to ensure that profit is not the only reason for donating.

"No one chooses to build their family this way; they come to my door with heartache and concern and worry that they'll never become parents," said Demma. "It's a unique community of women doing a

wonderful thing for each other."