

Couple seek to have twins born years apart

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A BRITISH couple hope to become the first in the world to have twins born years apart, using controversial test-tube technology that splits a single embryo into several parts - each capable of developing into an identical baby.

The married professional couple from Barking, east London, are to fly to Italy for the treatment, which is banned in Britain. At least one part of the embryo will be implanted in the woman, who is aged 32, and the rest will be frozen for future use. They could be safely stored indefinitely, enabling her to have its twin years later.

However, psychologists - and even experts in the newly developed technology of embryo-splitting - are worried by the ethical implications and psychological consequences for the resulting children. Gerald Schatten, the American scientist who pioneered the technique in monkeys, said: "My brother is seven years older than me and is schizophrenic. If I were his twin, I would be looking at the same thing happening to me."

The treatment of the couple is being supervised by Paul Rainsbury, an infertility specialist at the Bupa Roding hospital in Ilford, Essex, which applied unsuccessfully to perform embryo splitting. Any form of cloning using human embryos is banned in Britain.

Rainsbury believes the technique offers an effective way for a woman who produces very few healthy embryos to improve her chances of having children. "This is a form of cloning which occurs in nature when an embryo divides spontaneously to produce identical twins," said Rainsbury. "It has got to be the way for the future, but it looks as though it will not happen in Britain until the technique has become accepted elsewhere."

The couple, both accountants, have already spent £19,000 on unsuccessful conventional fertility treatment. They believe the embryo-splitting technique will reduce the number of times the wife has to take powerful drugs to boost her production of eggs. The husband, aged 33, said yesterday: "If this works, we would not be interested in the child or children becoming the object of media attention. We would just want them to grow up healthy and happy." He added: "I don't see why there would be a problem with identical twins being born at different times."

While he did not want his family's identity to become known, he was anxious that the technique should be publicised - "so that people realise the problems people like myself have in achieving what for others happens easily and naturally". Rainsbury has selected Biogenesi,

a Rome clinic that has expertise in the necessary micromanipulation techniques. Franco Lisi, the director, said: "There are possible advantages. You could implant the embryos in the same woman, which would increase the chances of success. Or you could implant them in two different women, or freeze some for later implantation."

Identical twins usually have an extraordinary bond, which scientists have been unable to explain. They often have the same life experiences simultaneously, the same illnesses - and there is even evidence that they can read one another's thoughts when separated.

Some experts believe twins could benefit by being born years apart. By knowing the diseases suffered by the older twin, the younger child could get preventive treatment - and the pair would have no reason to complain that they are not treated as individuals.

But not all experts are enthusiastic. Elizabeth Bryan, the medical director of the Multiple Births Foundation, said: "The second twin would have the pattern of its life laid out already - and would feel there was nothing that could be done to change it."