

DAILY NEWS

A BOOMING BABY BUSINESS *Unregulated, market for eggs, sperm burgeons*

BY EVAN PONDEL, Staff Writer

Her credentials read like any college graduate applying for a job, but instead of seeking employment, Angel is selling her ova. In just one year, the 24-year-old egg donor earned \$7,000 for her first batch of eggs, \$9,000 for the second and \$10,000 for her third.

It's all part of a booming fertility business - a relatively unregulated industry that is rapidly inflating the value of the eggs of healthy, young college-educated women.

On average, women are making anywhere from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per egg retrieval. But the ability to become an egg donor is not easy, often requiring an extensive screening process that calls for SAT scores, family-disease histories and increasingly "ideal" body types.

"The problem is that money has become the motivation," said Dr. Vicken Sahakian, medical director of the Pacific Fertility Center in Westwood, who has performed more than 4,000 egg retrievals. "If we keep on bidding up women's eggs, it's going to make it more prohibitive for would-be parents who won't be able to afford the donor."

A recent classified advertisement that ran online in the Daily Bruin, UCLA's student newspaper, read: "We are seeking women who have blue-green eyes, are under the age of 29, SAT 1300+, physically fit ... \$20,000 (plus all expenses)."

The money Angel netted from her donations was critical to her thinning budget. "It's basically a source of income that helps me live and pay rent to live in California," said the graduate student who didn't want her last name published.

Sahakian said the drive for young donors will continue to grow as more couples, including gay and lesbian couples, wait until their 30s and 40s to have kids. At the same time, technology is making it a lot easier for infertile parents to get pregnant, drumming up demand for healthy eggs and sperm, he said.

California Cryobank Inc., a privately held sperm-collection company in West Los Angeles, finished up a recruiting trip earlier this month to Cambridge, Mass., home to Harvard and MIT, where postcard-sized flyers were passed out that read "Got Sperm? ... make up to \$900 per month." On the back of the flyer were donor requirements: "19-38 years old, attending a four-year university or hold a bachelor's degree and one-year minimum time commitment."

But the donation process is considerably different for men and women. At California Cryobank, men are asked to make two to three donations a week, which entail a trip to the company's "masturbatoriums." The whole process usually takes no more than 30 minutes.

For women, a single donation requires at least a month-long commitment. It begins with about 20 days of self-administered hormone injections, three to four visits to a doctor for monitoring, followed by a 10-minute retrieval process under anesthesia, according to Sahakian.

During the retrieval, risks include excessive bleeding, infection, loss of fertility and "fatality, but that's theoretical. I've never seen that happen, but we do have extensive consents," said Sahakian, who noted the other risks are about one in 3,000 from his perspective. From the perspective of Elisa Polka, a 25-year-old egg donor from Jacksonville, Fla., the potential to help a couple have a baby far outweighs the risks. She had her second egg retrieval in Thousand Oaks about a month ago and said the side effects - mostly bloating and some abdominal discomfort - were minimal.

"The overall experience was fantastic," said Polka, who was flown out to Los Angeles, put up in a hotel with her mom and given \$70 a day for food. She has also made about \$10,000 between her two retrievals. "Of course, the money helps, but it's not the reason I did it."

Polka's most recent retrieval was facilitated by Egg Donor Inc., an Encino-based company that matches parents and donors. Egg Donor's Web site contains more than 900 photographs and descriptions of women who are donating their eggs. Those who visit the site can refine their search by specifying IQ ranges, religion and body type. Some argue that using the term "donor" mischaracterizes the women's actions because they are getting paid for their eggs.

Andrew Vorizmer, chief executive officer of Egg Donor since 1994, disagrees with that notion. "Women are not compensated for their eggs, they are technically donating eggs. The compensation is for the pain, suffering and inconvenience they go through," said Vorizmer, who noted that more than 60 percent of his company's donors are college graduates, while almost 40 percent are still in college.

While there are no laws governing age requirements for donors, Egg Donor Inc. requires a minimum age of 21. "We will not work with women under the age of 21 because we don't think they are capable of appreciating the risk of what they are doing," Vorizmer said.

Those who donate sperm at California Cryobank must be 18 and over. Dr. Cappy Rothman, co-founder and medical director of Cryobank, said if someone is old enough to vote or die in a war, he should be able to donate sperm.

Cryobank donors also go through an extensive screening process, with just 2 to 3 of every 100 applicants accepted into the program. The company mitigates the risk of populating a geographic area with the same sperm by reducing donations to about 25 families per donor. Meanwhile, a year's worth of donations usually result in about 10 to 15 pregnancies, Rothman said.

Like the egg donor business, a greater premium has been placed on sperm as more single women and lesbians consider having children. The difference is that the health risks associated with sperm donation are relatively low when compared with egg donation.

"And there is also danger if we want to think about egg donation as the commodification of women," said Debora Spar, a professor at Harvard Business School who is the author of the new book "The Baby Business."

"We have created a market in the components and services that allow people to produce children, and while it may not be inherently bad, it has the potential to be bad."

Spar said there is no reliable data that quantifies the egg donor business, even though spending on fertility-related procedures is estimated to be in the billions. And while she doesn't take a particular stance on the subject, Spar favors a national debate about the economic incentives associated with egg donation.

So does Jesse Reynolds of the Center for Genetics and Society, a public advocacy group in Oakland. "The assisted reproductive industry is entirely unregulated. And self-regulation from these companies is inadequate," said Reynolds, director of the project on biotechnology accountability. "The types of dangers that come to mind when certain traits of donors are being sought out include the notion of breeding better humans. And the premiums these women are getting paid is disturbing."

To control the prices paid for egg donations, the American Society of Reproductive Medicine has proposed the following guidelines: Women should only be paid for their time and inconvenience, not according to genetic traits; and payments of \$5,000 per retrieval is appropriate, but paying more than \$10,000 should be avoided.

The Birmingham, Ala.-based organization also believes in self-regulation and dislikes the idea of the federal government becoming more involved in the subject.

"We get very nervous when we think about that, and there should be a very good reason before the (federal) government gets involved," said Sean Tipton, spokesman for the society, whose members include doctors, laboratory technicians and research scientists.