

FREEZING TIME

A NEW COMPANY
FOUNDED BY WOMEN
COULD HELP WOMEN
DO THE UNTHINKABLE:
TURN BACK THEIR
BIOLOGICAL CLOCKS.
BY ALEXANDRA HALL

PREGNANT PAUSE: Extend Fertility founder Christy Jones Is taking the Idea of egg freezing mainstream.

NADIA BOULOS CAMPBELL is waiting for *the* call. The one from her doctor about the pregnancy.

"It isn't a clinical pregnancy until you can see a fetal sac and a heartbeat," she explains, checking nervously to be sure her cell phone is set at top volume.

It's not long before the phone rings, and Campbell's Pucci-esque top becomes a red blur as she makes dash for privacy in her patent leather stilettos. "It's one of my doctors," she apologizes. "I should take this."

The upshot of this call is not whether it's a boy or a girl. Campbell herself is not expecting unless you're talking about the healthy new business she and her investors hope to deliver. The doctor on the line is one of the reproductive experts employed by Extend Fertility, the new Boston-based company where she is the chief operating officer.

Campbell, who is 31, leans back into a brocade pillow in the lounge of the Spangler Center at Harvard Business School, where so many multimillion-dollar ventures have been conceived. This is where she and Extend Fertility CEO and founder Christy Jones—both Harvard MBAs—have spent countless hours sharpening their plan to take mainstream the idea of freezing women's eggs while they're young so they can safely put off pregnancy until later in their lives.

As it happens, the two top executives at Extend Fertility also represent its target audience: polished professional overachievers in their early to mid-thirties, a vast demographic (and prospective clientele) in this state. And while it isn't *her* pregnancy she was waiting to get the call about, Campbell and the rest of Extend Fertility's employees nonetheless hover around the news like a nervous family. It is, in a sense, a birth: A successful test pregnancy in Boston will mean both a green light to move forward by June with the city's first clinic exclusively for freezing eggs, and a huge step toward convincing women that the egg freezing process is viable—and therefore profitable for Campbell and Jones.

It's as dramatic a moment as the news of any pregnancy. Making egg freezing a common procedure for women would be "second only to the pill," says Campbell. "It's going to change the world."

FOR DECADES, in the most stereotypical terms, it's gone like this: Girl meets boy. Girl dates boy. Girl realizes she isn't exactly a girl anymore; in fact, she's 34. Girl realizes that if she wants a family, the time is nigh. Girl gets scared and starts pressuring boy to get married. Boy either caves in and produces a ring, or freaks out and runs away.

Or like this: Girl, married or not, gets high-powered job. Girl works hard for years. Girl gets pregnant. Girl struggles to juggle career and child rearing.

Extend Fertility dangles the promise that these scenarios could become history. More women are becoming pregnant later in life (in the United States the average age of a first-time mother has increased from 23.7 to 25.2 since 1985, and in Massachusetts it's the highest in the nation, at 27.8) for professional and personal reasons. Yet studies reveal that egg quality plummets after 35, raising the chances of miscarriage and birth defects.

So Extend Fertility seems an idea whose time has come, a streamlined egg-freezing service that holds a client's hand from the moment she starts looking for information on the egg-freezing process to the moment she thaws her eggs for use, thus setting itself apart from the a la carte, and arguably more impersonal, freezing services available to still-fertile women at general fertility clinics. In the process, the company wants to change how women control their bodies—effectively turning back their biological clocks. If successful, it would level the playing field for women, allowing them to truly have it all—or at least have the same options with which biology and society bless men.

To make it happen, though, Campbell and Jones have a more immediate challenge. They have to convince women to have the procedure—women who can afford to spend at least \$10,000 and who can accept that, when all is said and done, the technology might not get them pregnant.

THE DAY AFTER Sarah Jenkins finished grad school, she came face to face with the question of when she might have kids. "My stepmom, rather than saying, 'Congratulations, you finished: started telling me about how I needed to think about planning for a family,'" remembers Jenkins, whose name has been changed at her request. "I laugh about it now, but it's true. All my women friends

are talking about this issue. It's completely on our minds."

Now, a year later, the 31-year-old Jenkins is engaged and working for a Boston startup. And she's considering freezing her eggs. "Kids aren't the only focus in my life, but I do want a family; she explains. "And I would hate to find myself in a spot 10 years from now where I'd lost that opportunity." But her career is important, too. "I'm not just going to give that up. Egg freezing is one part of the solution to that. I just want to make sure I'm positioned to have a family when the time is right."

Even so, Jenkins is torn. She knows egg-freezing technology isn't perfect yet (the American Society for Reproductive Medicine still classifies it as "experimental"), and can't guarantee a full-term pregnancy. She's also concerned about the hormone treatments and the cost. "My career trajectory is to make a decent amount of money, so theoretically I could afford it," she says. "And when you think about how much I would spend on fertility treatments later on if I didn't have my eggs frozen, it's about the same. I know it's a big investment with no guarantee. But there'd be no guarantee if I were 40, trying to get pregnant, either. And my eggs would be older."

If Jenkins decides to freeze her eggs, she'll do it through Extend Fertility rather than a conventional fertility clinic, she says. "It's far more personal, more private, than a fertility clinic-which seems more for married people having difficulty getting pregnant. Whereas helping women like me is exactly what Extend focuses on."

Extend Fertility has differentiated itself from classic fertility clinics by first educating potential clients, then counseling patients through the process. "We put an unusual amount of emphasis on both services," says Campbell. "We get women calling us all the time who believe they're going to be fertile until menopause. Getting people comfortable with their biological clock, telling them about the risks-that's our most important first step."

IN FACT, THE COMPANY separates good candidates from bad: in part, by starting with their age. "The ideal time to freeze your eggs is the time you really aren't thinking about fertility: in your twenties," says company president Jones, who at 34 froze her own eggs and became Extend Fertility's first client. "So it's a challenge for us to reach women when they aren't really ready to think seriously about their reproductive future."

Clients who are considered good prospects must pass a screening to make sure they're fertile and healthy, then undergo a rigorous process to stimulate, harvest, and, finally, store the unfertilized eggs.

First comes the growth stage: To stimulate the development of eggs, a patient must inject herself twice a day for 10 to 12 days with FDA-approved follicle stimulation hormones. Precision and a steady hand are essential. A final injection deep into the hip with a large syringe must be made exactly 35 hours before harvesting. The patient also has to undergo four to six ultrasounds, usually one every few days, to monitor her progress.

When a woman's ovaries fill with eggs, it's common for her to feel bloated and moody, thanks to the hormones and activity swirling within. On the day of the retrieval, she is placed under a light anesthesia and undergoes what Extend Fertility describes as a "relatively painless" procedure: Doctors insert an ultrasound probe with an egg-retrieving needle into the vagina (there is no incision) and carefully guide it to the ovarian follicles to pull out the eggs. It's a short procedure-30 minutes or so-and recovery from the anesthesia takes a couple of hours at most.

Of the potential side effects (including bloating, nausea, fatigue, and cysts), the most serious is a usually reversible condition called ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. It occurs when there's too much estrogen in the system, and can result in excessive fluid retention, blood clots, and enlarged ovaries, which are at risk for rupturing or twisting and require immediate surgery. Extend Fertility, which has already established partnerships with clinics during the past year and a half in New York, New Jersey, California, and Texas, says none of its patients has ever hyperstimulated.

The company will store the harvested unfertilized eggs until the client decides she wants to get pregnant (None has done so yet). The eggs are then thawed slowly and fertilized with the woman's partner's sperm outside the body, a process called in vitro. When the fertilized eggs mature into embryos, up to three are transferred into the client's uterus to begin the pregnancy.

It isn't cheap. Typically not covered by insurance, the process costs \$10,000 for the initial medical care (the harvesting, retrieval, freezing, and up to a year of storage), around \$400 for each subsequent year of storage, and \$2,000 to \$4,000 for medications.

"It can be very expensive; Campbell willingly admits. "But think about what some women pay for other elective medical procedures, such as plastic surgery, or what it costs to get their teeth whitened over the years. Compared with those kinds of things, this is far more of a life decision."

JENNIFER MITCHELL, 31, is making that decision right now. Raised on the South Shore, the retail company employee first read about Extend Fertility in a fashion magazine.

Unlike patients who freeze eggs because they have cancer (chemotherapy can cause infertility) or may be at risk for endometriosis or premature ovarian failure, which can bring on early menopause, Mitchell, whose name has also been changed, came to Extend Fertility entirely for personal reasons.

"I'm dating a lot," she says. "But I'm thinking if I want a family, this is the time to plan. Even if I get married in the next few years, this takes the pressure off to immediately have kids."

Like Jenkins, Mitchell is still debating whether to have the procedure. "The main obstacle is the cost," she says. "I went to grad school. I've got loans to pay off. Basically, I'm also open to adoption, or I'd be really panicked right now."

Money notwithstanding, commercial egg freezing may ease such panic. "Many women come to us for professional reasons-doctors and lawyers who know they want a big family but also know they'll be working really hard for the next 10 years; says Campbell. "This could finally help equalize the options. Imagine a world where 25-year-olds freeze their eggs. This is another way to compete in the workforce."

Like every new social development, however, this one has its critics. "People have argued that widespread egg freezing for purely professional reasons is a step backward for women," Campbell concedes, "since it means society has forced women to change their biology instead of adapting to female employees' needs. But society changes a lot more slowly than we can create technology. And in

the interim, there's this procedure." She even suggests that companies might someday provide the procedure for women as a perk-an idea that excites candidates like Mitchell, for whom the price is a problem. "That would show a gratifying dedication to women in the workplace," Mitchell says. Of course, it also means the women who would get ahead are those willing to postpone their pregnancies.

Meanwhile, a solid number of women who opt to freeze their eggs seem to be viewing it chiefly as a backup plan. "In my fantasy world, I'd love to be happily married by 35; says Mitchell, "then get pregnant on my own."

Others may need more convincing. "It takes a few years for people-first doctors, then women, then society-to accept an idea; says Campbell. "I mean, look at erectile dysfunction. Years ago, nobody talked about it. It's a major social mentality change, and you have to get the early adopters, the doctors, and word of mouth. It takes a few years."

That's why Boston is a major part of the marketing plan. "It's a haven for educated professional women," says Jones. But it's hard to get potential clients to embrace the concept in general. "There's no immediate gratification here," admits Jones. "That's a big hurdle."

CAMPBELL'S PHONE call was the kind of anticlimax many expectant mothers can relate to. But while that call did not bring any news, Extend Fertility announced in November that three women had become pregnant in a research study evaluating the science of egg freezing. The women are due in the summer and the fall, and their successful pregnancies will be a clear sign that freezing eggs is a viable way to slow down the biological clock.

More than 100 women in other cities have now frozen their eggs with Extend Fertility, and all have an investment in these three test cases. Needless to say, so does the company itself.

"It's not easy. Someday freezing eggs will be much less complicated," Campbell says with a sigh. "But meanwhile, we can do way better than our mothers could."