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Freeze Those Eggs! 35-Year-Old Women Make Safe Deposits

by Sheelah Kolhatkar

"I think the thing with me is that I have not had a huge maternal instinct, *ever*. And I've been waiting for it to kick in since I was 30. And it just hasn't kicked in," said Mary Purdy, who turns 35 in two weeks and lives on the Upper West Side. "And so I keep on thinking: Is it really realistic, that I would never have a child? It sounds kind of crazy to think that I would never have one, but it's crazy to think that I *would* have one. I kept on telling myself, 'I don't have to make the decision now, I have time.' But now that I'm going to be 35, maybe I don't have that much time. I still don't want a child right now, but I might want one in the future, and I'm worried about the fact that by the time I want one, it will be too late for my body to conceive something."

Such monologues are the recurring—and jarring—internal soundtrack to the lives of many single New York women, who often find themselves crushed between fertility hysteria and men who sense it and run away.

Ms. Purdy, who said she is dating someone but has no imminent plans to marry the fellow, has contemplated having her eggs frozen as a kind of "insurance policy."

"The last time I went to the gynecologist, I was like, 'How does everything look in there?'" said Ms. Purdy, who is studying to be a nutritionist. "'You know, is everything O.K.?' And she said, 'Yes.' But really, after 35, the chances go way downhill. And I think that really struck a chord with me. Because I thought, 'If this is something that I do want to have happen, the time is now.'"

Every woman in New York remembers when that Sylvia Hewlett book—*Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*, about how most career women end up tragic and childless—came out in 2002 and scared the crap out of them. An entrepreneur named Christy Jones remembers it, too, and cited the accompanying frenzy as partial motivation for starting her company, Extend Fertility, a few years ago, which plans to offer egg-freezing to New York-area women on a commercial basis in the next few months.

"I was 32 and aware of my biological clock," said Ms. Jones, now 35. "It was around the time that the Sylvia Hewlett book came out, and I realized it was *all about the egg*."

The futuristic-sounding, "investigational" procedure known as oocyte cryopreservation, in which a woman's eggs are extracted, freeze-dried and socked away for future use, has been available to women with terminal illnesses for a few years, but healthy women have had

limited access to it.

Ms. Jones' start-up already offers egg-freezing services out of clinics near San Francisco, in Pasadena, Calif., Austin, Tex., and southern New Jersey. Extend will not disclose how many women have banked eggs with the company, although *The New Times* reported that, as of this fall, only three women in the United States had done it, with Ms. Jones being one of them. But Ms. Jones noted that 80 women across the U.S. were in some stage of the screening or freezing process with Extend.

The price seems high: \$10,000 for the egg-extraction process, another \$3,000 to \$5,000 for the accompanying hormones, and \$40 a month thereafter for storage—in addition to the eventual \$8,000 to \$12,000 cost of the I.V.F. process of having eggs fertilized and implanted back into the woman.

Then again: "If you went in and had liposuction, you'd be paying \$12,000, and an eye job goes for \$8,000," said Dr. Judy Kuriansky, a Manhattan psychologist. "Would you rather have a baby or an eye job?"

The Manhattan branch of Extend Fertility will operate out of RMA of New York, a fertility clinic on Madison Avenue and 60th Street, which is conducting a study of egg-freezing success rates in its own facility before fully promoting it to women on an elective basis in the upcoming months.

"We get phone calls about this every day," said Dr. Alan Copperman of RMA. "I think that there are a lot of 35-year-old executives who have terrific careers, and who might be single and are just not ready to have children, but don't want to give up the opportunity in the future."

An Extend Fertility spokeswoman, Tiffany Nels, said that their typical interested client was in her mid- to late 30's, "women who felt a real sense of urgency, who were getting up against their fertility bar, often single professionals or women who thought they'd have kids by now because they got married young—and then divorced."

"It's not 100 percent guaranteed, so it's not something women should just rely on, but it gives women more options to take control of their fertility," said Ms. Jones. "Ironically, we were worried for many years about how *not* to get pregnant. Now we're worried about how to get pregnant. This could be as revolutionary as the birth-control pill."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Manhattan, with its high concentration of single females in the throes of high-testosterone careers, is prime territory for a boutique egg-freezing service.

But does it work? Estimates of actual pregnancy rates resulting from frozen eggs are sketchy. Ms. Jones cited live birth rates in studies at around 20 to 30 percent, while some doctors say that there is too little research to even say. Dr. Copperman said that he hoped RMA's study would yield rates of 30 percent. (And things may improve with the technology. For example, in 1990, the successful birth rate for 35 to 37 year old women using I.V.F. was below 25

percent; now it's around 40 percent.)

"The technology is wonderful, but we don't know how wonderful it is yet," said Dr. Frederick Licciardi, the director of egg donation at New York University's School of Medicine. "It's a little bit bothersome for a company to go out there and offer somebody a promise that they don't know if they can keep yet. They do not know what the chance of a pregnancy is going to be with those eggs that they're freezing. I just don't want a patient to think that, O.K., she's got those eggs in the bank, now she's done, she's set for life, because she may not be. But ideally, it could be very good for women, if they could have a reasonable chance of pregnancy."

"I always say, any idiot can freeze, but it takes a real smart person to thaw it out," said Dr. Jacques Moritz, the director of gynecology at St. Luke's-Roosevelt. "They've figured out the freezing, but not the thawing quite yet. The numbers aren't quite there, although it's very, very promising."

Ms. Purdy said she thought the proposed cost of freezing one's eggs was "outrageous," especially when faced with such an uncertain outcome.

However, in some cases, interested parties are more than willing to pitch in to freeze a few eggs.

"There was a *Newsweek* article that explained how they do it and how the procedure works and how much it costs," said Faye Rogaski, 29, who runs her own public-relations firm. "My mother clipped out the article for me and had it sitting on the kitchen counter when I walked in, and really wanted to talk to me about it. My mom told me that she wanted to pay for me to have this done."

"Recently, my mom—who's really sort of obsessively fretful about this state of affairs and reminds me whenever possible that I need to breed *toute suite*—offered to have my eggs frozen for me," said Amy, a 37-year-old writer in Park Slope who did not want her last name published. "I didn't tell her to shut up immediately, nor did I pretend my cell phone was suddenly not working—so I must be considering it."

Not everyone is a fan of this brave new gynecological world.

"When I hear in the news that someone at 60 just gave birth or something, it's hard for me to celebrate that. It just sounds unnatural," said Dixie Feldman, 43, who lives in midtown, works in television and does not have children. "And there's a classist element to it—it's only available to women of a certain economic level. I just feel uneasy about all these sorts of things. But I wouldn't want to impose my will on someone else if they wanted to do it."

"I don't see anything wrong with it, except that I think it's prohibitively expensive," said Ms. Rogaski, who just got out of a relationship. "I think it's a wonderful thing. I'm nervous—I'll be the first to say it. What if I'm 35 and I can't have children? What if I stop producing eggs by then? My peak is, you know, dwindling as the days go by and I'm not meeting the guy

who I want to have children with."

"I have wished a few times that I had frozen a few of mine," said Melanie Girton, a 35-year-old lawyer. "It's a fantastic way of allowing women to beat back the clock and release some of that awful tension between our bodies and our minds. It's a conflict that men don't have—having to choose between slowing down to have a family or foregoing having kids naturally in order to consummate their career potential."

Ms. Jones had overheard friends having similar conversations at a point when she was seeking a concept for a new company to launch. She was then a 32-year-old M.B.A. student at Harvard and was involved in two software start-ups in the late 1990's, which eventually netted her a tidy profit of \$2 million, according to *Forbes* magazine. Ms. Jones describes Extend Fertility as "privately funded—by me."

There are reports of around 100 babies who have been born around the world from frozen eggs, many of them using the technique of an Italian doctor, Dr. Raffaella Fabbri, whose formula Ms. Jones has licensed. And then there is Indianapolis-based Dr. Jeffrey Boldt, a partner in Cryo-Eggs International, an egg bank that sells frozen eggs from youthful egg donors for \$3,000 an egg. Dr. Boldt has also been offering to freeze women's own eggs for the past five years, using a process that he developed—for the bargain price of about \$7,000.

"Maybe I will take my mom up on the offer," said Ms. Rogaski. "I can't bear the thought of having her pay for something like that, but that would be a really sad thing for me in my life if I never had the opportunity to have a child that was my own child. I mean, you deal with it, but that's something that I want in my life."

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