

Claire and Richard's story

My name is Claire and my husband's name is Richard: we met at work (NHS mental health unit) in 2011 and married in 2013. Richard already knew of my infertility prior to marrying, we spoke at great lengths how and what we would do if we chose to want a family in the future.

I am 30 years-young. In 2010 I was sent by my GP to have a laparoscopy as my menstrual cycle had been irregular for years and I was starting to worry that I wasn't normal having spoken to a lot of my friends and colleagues. During my operation the consultant found that both of my fallopian tubes were distended/distorted and were leaking toxic fluid into my womb, therefore I was referred to hospital for further investigation and the possible removal of one of my tubes.

In hospital, I was warned by the consultant, after he had viewed my previous medical investigation notes, that there was a slight possibility I may need both tubes removing if they weren't able to strip and save one. After my operation I was greeted by the caring and empathic female doctor who made sure I was comfortable and gave me the gut wrenching news that they had in fact had to remove both fallopian tubes; 'yet there was still hope as you will be able to have IVF if in the future you want to start a family.'

Richard is 30 years-young too and in 2003, while at college, Richard contracted mumps and was sent to hospital for treatment; it was shortly after this he was told that due to his condition there would be a high possibility that his fertility would be greatly affected in the future.

IVF: the decision

Both Richard and I enjoyed married life but it became apparent to us both that we would like the opportunity to have children so with positivity in our minds we went to the GP in order to be referred to a fertility clinic - which was straightforward due to both our issues. It was amazing to find out that at the fertility clinic the lead consultant was the same man who had removed my fallopian tubes years before and we took comfort in the fact we would be in safe hands.

Richard went through numerous semen analysis tests, which showed he had a low sperm count and poor motility and I had many blood tests and we were told that yes we met the criteria for funded NHS IVF and he suggested due to our situation we had intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), however in our area there was only NHS funding for two cycles, but we were still positive as it was better than nothing at all.

The first cycle

We picked up the prescription, the mound of medication injections and 'how to' guides for our first cycle and we were so sure it would work. Due to the job we both work in, all of our colleagues had to be made aware of what we were planning and we had so much support from everyone it was an amazing time even though my moods were horrendous; people took that as a good sign (felt like the menopause tenfold).

After taking the meds we went in for egg collection and they retrieved nine ... and the day after we were called by the embryologist to say that five had made it and were fertilised! Beaming with excitement, and ready to have one embryo transferred back two days later, the other four embryos were frozen as part of our first cycle.

The dreaded two-week-wait

This is where we had to wait and wait for what felt a lifetime before a blood test to show whether or not IVF had worked and that I could possibly be pregnant. So we waited and went for the blood test in the morning to then find out that we would have to wait until the afternoon for the results. The results came, and it wasn't good, all the time/effort/changes we had made to our lives had no effect: we were not pregnant. However, we didn't let this get us down: we still had some on ice.

Frozen embryo transfer (FET)

Back to the consultant we went, and decided that we would go straight into having FET. As before all the medications were prescribed and we were scheduled to have these frozen little ones put back in. We went through all the same process and had two embryos transferred back, (in my mind still another two in the freezer just in case), and again we went through the two-week-wait. After we had the blood test again, we decided not to stay in the house and wait for the call, we went shopping instead. The phone call came; Richard spoke to the clinic as I couldn't bear it: WE WERE PREGNANT!! Both of us couldn't hold it in; we were shocked that it could have worked and that we were finally going to be grown up parents! The clinic made us an appointment actually on Richard's birthday in December to have a scan and see what was happening.

We went to the appointment with so much happiness and they said it may still be a bit early to see the heartbeat properly. At that time the nurse could see the embryo and the sac which our little baby was growing in but was unsure about a heartbeat, so with this in mind they made us an appointment for 23 December just before they closed for the Christmas period. On 23 December we went for the next scan, both holding our breath with anticipation and glaring at the monitor to see our baby. The sister of the unit came in and sat us both down to tell us that unfortunately the baby was growing but there was no heartbeat and that we both needed to prepare ourselves as this would result in miscarriage.

Devastation as an explanation does not do this justice! We were given choices there and then regarding what we would like to do.

1. let nature take its course (miscarry naturally)
2. take medications for miscarriage to come away
3. surgery to remove miscarriage

We both made the decision to have the least restrictive which was number 1, especially over the Christmas period.

Christmas came and went and I was still having major morning sickness throughout; by New Year I had had enough of the sickness and, knowing that what was inside me was not alive, we opted to go to hospital for medication. We sat in a waiting room on a ward full of young girls coming for abortions and medications to abort and were finally taken into a side room and given the controlled tablet to remove the miscarriage. On the way home I started to bleed and thought this must be it ... I bled for 3 days.

We went back to the fertility clinic for a scan to see if everything was clear in preparation for our last FET to commence only to find that my body, despite everything, had clung onto the embryos and that they had split into three but yet all had died. It was then that we were scheduled to have surgery to remove the miscarriage two days before my birthday in January. I have never been as inconsolable as I was that day, yet Richard stood by me and tried everything he could summon to stay positive.

A few months later we had the remaining two frozen embryos replaced and had yet another knock back that it had not worked ... we decided to rest and leave it a while before our next and final cycle.

The second cycle

We spoke to our consultant and decided that we would have the egg collection in the same year, however we would have all embryos frozen to give my body time to recover. During

egg collection they only managed to get five eggs and poor Richard had to provide two semen samples to find out they were no good and ended up in surgery straight after me to retrieve viable sperm.

After both of us being in surgery we went home slightly sore and supporting each other still with all the hope we could muster. The day after the embryologist called us to tell us how many had survived and we were shocked with the news that there were only two and that they would freeze them on day one for us so that when we were ready to have them replaced, we could call up to arrange everything.

We waited until the following year which by this time was 2016. So in February 2016 we started all the medication one last time as we knew that the clinic would be replacing our final two embryos. In March 2016, we went into the clinic to have them put back in ... yet again we found ourselves worrying over the two-week-wait but managed to busy ourselves; by this time I decided to take time off work to rest and reflect. Richard and I talked at great length about what we would do if we were pregnant and what we would do if we weren't; we spoke in great depth about adoption yet still with hope we went for our last and final blood test.

Richard took the last phone call we would receive and while he was at work, had the unfortunate duty of making the phone call to me to say that it was negative.

At present we have both come to the conclusion that we need time to heal ourselves and learn what our lives were like before IVF took over. I am in the process of challenging my local clinical commissioning group (CCG) about its policy of IVF treatment, and hoping that England will follow Scotland's example of abiding by National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) fertility guidelines and give everyone access to three NHS-funded IVF cycles. In our experience there should be more support for the partners of women going through IVF treatment and more fairness in the NHS, but this hasn't stopped us in attempting to make any influence on the future generations of people accessing fertility treatment.