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Family circle is a triangle



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Heidi Kuchta rejoices as her new niece, Heidi Lynn, opens her eyes during a feeding. The grown-up Heidi donated her reproductive eggs so that her sister, Cheryl, and brother-in-law Steve Clifford, left, could have the child.

Sister's eggs aid in multiple births

By DEBBI SNOOK

PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

Someday, Cheryl and Steve Clifford will tell their children where they came from.

They will explain that Cheryl, at 48, had only a slim chance of having healthy reproductive eggs, and that her sister, Heidi Kuchta, 28, agreed to donate hers.

The meeting with Steve's sperm happened in a petri dish in Akron City Hospital and the fertilized eggs were implanted in Cheryl's womb. They grew and were born.

Sound scientific? A bit cold?

Not to the Cliffords, a Canton-area couple who may have heard the call to parenthood late, but heard it clearly. And not to Cheryl's younger sister, Heidi, who may never have children but dearly wanted to help her sister.

Oct. 12 Cheryl gave birth to Robert Steven, Ruth Marie, Heidi Lynn and Paul — quadruplets who made the news. The real news is that in vitro (literally, in glass) fertilizations usually fail for 3 out of 4 couples.

"We beat the odds," said Steve.

Finally, as if four newborns aren't enough to contend with, the Cliffords face the unusual prospect of being a genetically newfangled family: Having asked a third family member to help create their children, they hope they all will be rewarded by it.

"We want Heidi to have as active a relationship with the children as her time and interest allows," said Steve. "We would feel that way regardless of her involvement as a donor."

"We expect her to feel a special closeness," added Cheryl.

"I'm going to be a very special aunt," agreed Heidi, who lives in New Hartford, Conn., but is considering a move to Canton.

Like thousands of families before them, Cheryl, Steve and Heidi thought deeply about their decision. Yet in some ways they are pioneers with no road map.

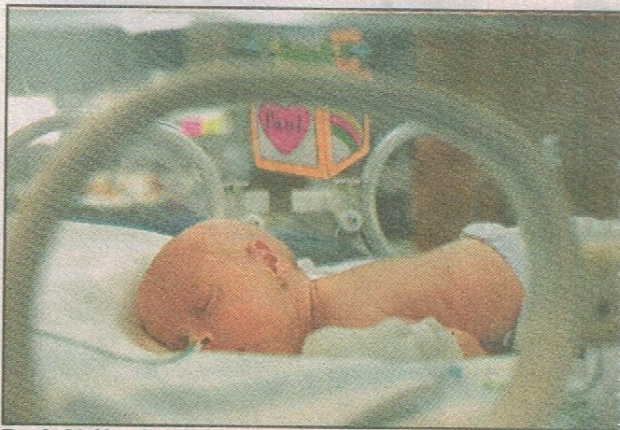
No studies have been done on how family members might feel after the birth from a sister-to-sister egg donation, or when and how the children from that union should be told about their beginnings.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine in Birmingham, Ala., a key source for statistics in the field, does not have exact figures on how many egg donors are sisters. Of 2,766 reported donors in 1993, 2,167 were anonymous, 599 were known or designated.

Even those numbers are incomplete. There is no federal mandate for in vitro clinics to report their totals.

Seventeen years after the birth of Louise Brown, the first "test-tube baby," there is still a lot to learn.

SEE BIRTHS/4-E



Paul Clifford was the last of the quadruplets to breathe without the help of a respirator.

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All in the family



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Heidi Kuchta beams as she holds Heidi Lynn, one of the quadruplets born to her sister Cheryl Clifford at Akron City Hospital. The babies couldn't have been born without Heidi's help. She donated healthy eggs for Cheryl to use even though Heidi is unsure whether she will be able to have her own children someday. Proud grandmother Gertrude Kuchta stands by. See story, Page 1-E.

A family circle becomes a triangle

BIRTHS FROM 1-E

And we can't learn it from existing sperm donor studies, said Machel Seibel, medical director of the Faulkner Centre for Reproductive Medicine in Boston and author of an upcoming book, "Understanding Family Building Through Egg and Sperm Donation" (Jones and Bartlett).

The reason: Sperm is most often lent easily and privately, while egg donation requires months of preparation, a series of invasive hormone shots and surgeries and, if the donor is known, a strong support system among the principals.

"It creates a new family," he said.

And new family roles.

"The good thing is you know who the donor is," he said. "The bad thing is you know who the donor is."

Susan Klock, a researcher in reproduction and clinical psychologist at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., wonders how those roles might change.

"Is the aunt just the aunt or looked at as the mommy or a second mommy?" she asked. "How does the sister feel about being a mother, and how does the other one feel about how she's raising the children?"

"What if the donor becomes infertile after giving up her eggs? How then will she feel knowing her sister is raising her only available progeny? And how will that come out in a custody arrangement?"

The Cliffords and Heidi faced these questions in early counseling sessions. They say they can't predict the future but are sure they did the right thing. It was crucial that they believed that.

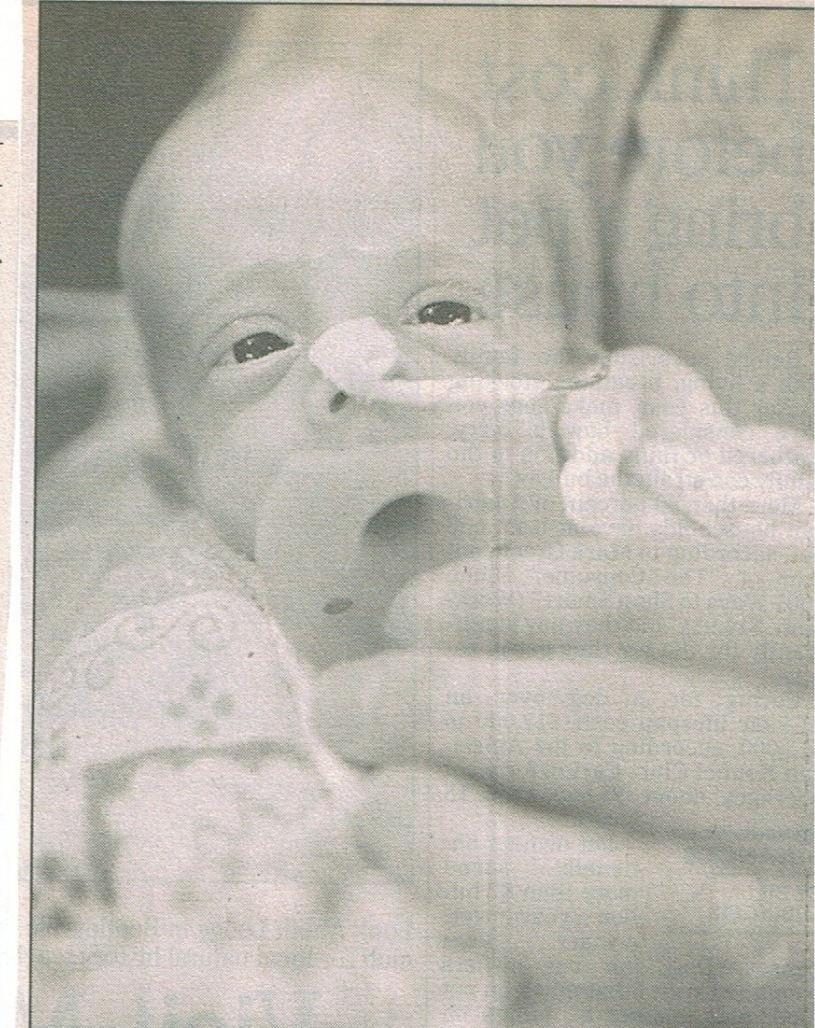
"It's necessary for health care providers to rule out whether any coercion has taken place in the family," said Gladys White, executive director of the National Advisory Board on Ethics and Reproduction, a private, nonprofit group based in Washington, D.C.

Even if the grown-ups resolve issues, Klock said their children may have questions of their own.

"Can a child understand? When can they understand? And what does it do to their development, which is critical during adolescence when they are thinking about their own reproduction? There are a number of ways these questions could not have a good outcome."

Steve Clifford knows how he'll tell his children. When they are old enough to understand, he will first explain "how precious they are to us."

Then he's going to whip out the



Premature baby Robert Steven Clifford takes food in a tube until he can take four bottle feedings a day.

family album and have a laugh with the kids over photos he took of the fertility clinic, right down to a petri dish.

Sound like the coping humor of a regular family? Some experts say that egg donor births are more normal than most of us would imagine.

"People are concerned that technology is taking society down a slippery slope," said Seibel, "but if you really think about it, 1 in 2 marriages end in divorce. Half the time the children are ... living with a nongenetic parent. If you look at it from that perspective, then technology is following, not leading."

Thomas Murray, director of the Center for Bioethics at Case Western Reserve University and author of the upcoming book "The Worth of a Child" (University of California Press), likened the donation of eggs to the donation of a kidney. He called them priceless gifts that can enrich a family.

If competitiveness develops between adults, the challenge would be "no more fundamentally dangerous" than many others. "If a child is going to be loved and brought up well, I'm not going to complain."

Klock said the outcome de-

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Heidi Kuchta, right, gets to know the quadruplets her sister Cheryl and her husband Steve Clifford bore with the help of her donated eggs. From left are Robert Steven, Paul, Ruth Marie and Heidi Lynn.

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depends on the maturity of the people involved.

In one sense, Cheryl and Heidi came from a newfangled family. Their mother, Gertrude Kuchta, was 47 when Heidi was born, a surprise pregnancy that was initially seen as the onset of menopause.

With 20 years between the sisters, Cheryl was old enough to be Heidi's mother. Indeed, when their father died of cancer, Cheryl stepped into a parental role.

Cheryl spent many weekends with Heidi and asked her to help out in her class.

"She tried to convince me that all things happen for a reason," said Heidi. "She kept pushing me to be more concerned at school."

Cheryl, meanwhile, relished her role as an older sister and as an unmarried teacher.

In 1988, about the time she was turning 40, Cheryl met Steve Clifford at an event sponsored by the United Church of Christ. Both were ordained ministers with their own congregations. Cheryl now teaches Sunday school and Steve runs a tax firm that specializes in religious organizations.

Marriage changed Cheryl's mind about children.

"We got to know each other better," she said. "My husband was more concerned about having a family. He only had a few relatives when we got married, and now he's the only one in his family."

"We started thinking about being older and what it would be like by ourselves. The idea of having children grew on me."

But conception was a long time coming. The Cliffords were open to adoption, but only after they had tried everything else. A spe-

cialist suggested in vitro fertilization, but because of Cheryl's age, her eggs only had a 3 percent to 4 percent chance of producing a healthy baby. The specialist suggested using the eggs of a donor — a family member or friend in her 20s.

"We looked at each other and said, 'Heidi,'" Steve recalled.

Heidi agreed, after thinking overnight.

"A lot of people are skeptical about me doing this," said Heidi. "They wanted to make sure I knew what I was doing because they are my biological children."

"I talked to a psychologist for an hour and a half and he went really in-depth about regretting it later."

"But I'm single, not close to marriage and I'm working on a career. It's a chance to help somebody else if I never have children of my own."

She may never.

Heidi suffers from endometriosis, a disturbance in her menstrual process. If it returns, she could face a hysterectomy. She also has congenitally weak kidneys. Her doctor has advised her against carrying more than one child at a time.

"I would still like to have a child," she said. "I'm still at a very young age."

This spring, Heidi almost felt pregnant. In order to hyperovulate — produce more than the normal solo egg each month — she had to give herself hormone shots for several weeks. The dosage built until March 14 when her eggs were surgically removed in Akron.

"I was bloated. I had high mood swings. I felt good one day and the next, really sad."

Cheryl and Steve had kept in constant touch, telling her how special she was to help them. Simultaneously, Cheryl was taking her own series of shots to get ready to accept a fertilized egg. Some were oil-based hormones.

"It was thick and painful and a slow process," said Cheryl.

The harvest was rich: Nine eggs from Heidi, all but one considered usable. Four were stored for Cheryl and Steve's possible future use. Three days later, four were implanted by needle into Cheryl's reproductive system.

Everyone hoped at least one egg would "take." Four did.

Cheryl's physical trials multiplied. She spent the last three months of her pregnancy in bed, trying not to put much wear and tear on the sacs surrounding each infant. She was prone to leg cramps, some of them lasting hours.

When the babies were born, Heidi saw them for the first time on a television news report.

"I was shaken," she said. "I wished I could be there."

Heidi is now considering a move to the Canton area. The New England economy is tight, she said, and she needs a new challenge in the engineering field. She has already done a few interviews in Ohio.

If she moves here, she will be following her mother, Gertrude, who sold her house in Connecticut to move in and help the new family.

"I've got nothing tying me down," Heidi said. "I could be closer to the kids. I could live with them a little while with the intention of getting my own place."

Because she and Cheryl are so close, Heidi said she has no second thoughts about giving up her legal rights to the children.

"I might regret it later, but I told my family, if I hadn't at least tried to help, that would bother me more."

Gertrude's take: "Heidi said she doesn't want Steve's kids; she wants her own."

The Clifford household has been quiet since the births. Only this week were the eight-week premature babies expected to be unhitched from feeding tubes at the hospital and sent home.

Cheryl has used the time to heal from her surgery. She and Steve have asked friends to pray for them when the babies had temporary snags in their development.

As ministers, Cheryl and Steve said they appreciated the two sessions of counseling they received.

"I'm glad the hospital realizes they're bringing together more than a sperm and an egg," said Steve. But he doesn't see it as a guarantee.

"We can't predict our reactions five or 10 years in advance. It just helps if you start out with a good relationship. And this is starting out like most gifts given out of love."