

Fertility nurse, counsellor , friend

Mind Your Body, The Straits Times (Thursday, 26 March 2009)

Lending emotional support and a listening ear to women undergoing fertility treatment is part and parcel of the job of fertility nurses. **POON CHIAN HUI** reports.



Ms Nurhabibah Samirah (left) - seen here with her five-month-old identical twin daughters, Nursyahirah Saharuddin (far left) and Nursyafiqah Saharuddin - is grateful for Ms Tovelie Loh's (far left) support throughout her IVF treatment. -- ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

She counsels her patients on matters ranging from medical treatments to payment options, provides emotional support during difficult times and even answers their calls in the middle of the night.

For Ms Tovelie Loh, 32, lending such support and a listening ear to patients are part and parcel of her job as a fertility nurse.

After all, the last thing a woman on fertility treatment needs is additional stress.

'In addition to medical work like doing blood tests for patients, we also try to build rapport with them as this can help make the fertility treatment easier to bear,' said the senior staff nurse at the Clinic for Human Reproduction, National University Hospital (NUH).

The fertility treatment that Ms Loh is referring to is in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), where egg cells are fertilised by sperm outside the body. The embryos are then placed in the womb.

If an embryo manages to attach itself to the lining inside the womb, pregnancy results.

However, many women undergoing IVF are likely to suffer disappointment, said Professor P.C. Wong, head and senior consultant of NUH's division of reproductive endocrinology and fertility. 'The success rate for IVF is 36 per cent,' he said. 'About one in three women will become pregnant.'

This makes the supportive role of fertility nurses important, he added.

Even though women know the chances of becoming pregnant are not high, it does not make it any easier for nurses to be bearers of bad news. Despite eight years of experience as a fertility nurse, Ms Loh still finds it tough to tell patients that their pregnancy test came back negative.

As many women hope fervently that they will be one of the lucky ones to become pregnant, failure to become so can be devastating.

'If they are very emotional, I just let them cry,' said Ms Loh, who is married with no kids. 'After they calm down, I will encourage them by saying that they can always try again.'

Ms Nurhabibah Samirah, 32, was one of those who did not give up. She underwent three cycles of IVF treatment before she became pregnant with twins on her third try. Each IVF cycle takes six weeks to complete. 'After two failures, I was so thrilled to hear that I was pregnant,' Ms Nurhabibah said. 'The feeling was indescribable.' She gave birth to identical twin girls last October.

She appreciated having a confidante like Ms Loh, who was always at hand during the treatment, she said. 'I liked knowing that I could always call Tovelie if I had any questions about the injections,' she said.

In IVF, women have to inject themselves with hormones daily over a 12-day period to induce their eggs to mature. This is done using a pen-like device, said Prof Wong.

The eggs are then retrieved through a 20-minute surgical procedure before they are combined with sperm to produce embryos.

It was during such an egg-retrieval procedure when Ms Nurhabibah realised the depth of her friendship with Ms Loh. 'I was at the hospital feeling lost,' she said. 'However, when I saw Tovelie, I was relieved immediately.'

Still, Ms Loh has had some unpleasant experiences. 'Occasionally, we get patients who are very stressed and who vent their frustration on the nurses,' she said.

However, the joy of being able to share in any good news beats such blues. Ms Loh said: 'Once, one of my colleagues was so happy for her patient that she shouted out loud in the busy clinic, 'She's pregnant'. We all cheered.'