More Seeking IVF At Public Hospitals
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Up to 50% surge in patient numbers credited to govt subsidy for fertility treatment

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MORE women have been trying for test-tube babies at public hospitals, since the Government began subsidising in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) last August.

The numbers of those undergoing IVF at KK Women's and Children's (KKH), National University (NUH) and Singapore General hospitals (SGH) swelled by 40 to 50 per cent in the fourth quarter of last year, over the same period in 2007.

The number of women seeking such fertility treatment has been rising over the years, but last quarter's growth outstrips that of previous years.

Doctors credit the surge to the subsidy.

Professor P.C. Wong, senior consultant of NUH's department of obstetrics and gynaecology, said: 'It has definitely made IVF more affordable, and encouraged couples who have difficulties conceiving to come forward for early treatment.'

Agreeing, Dr Roland Chieng, consultant at SGH's Centre for Assisted Reproduction, said it had had a catalytic effect on couples who may have put off treatment because they could not afford it.

The media publicity generated by the subsidy has also increased awareness among infertile couples that their problem can be treated, drawing more of them out, added Dr Loh Seong Feei, who heads KKH's department of reproductive medicine.

An IVF cycle costs about $7,000 to $10,000 in public hospitals, and about $8,000 to $15,000 in the private sector. At any of the nine IVF centres, a couple can use Medisave for their first three tries: $6,000 for the first cycle, and $5,000 and $4,000 subsequently.

But for the first time, since August last year, Singaporeans and permanent residents can get up to $3,000 paid by the Government for each IVF cycle, up to three, carried out at public hospitals.

Though the subsidy was not a deciding factor for Ms Agnes Chen, 34, who is expecting her first baby in June, it was a welcome gift.

The part-time lecturer began consultations at SGH early last year, but started treatment only in September when she did not have to teach.

She said of the subsidy: 'It's really a bonus. We're relieved to get any amount, and it will definitely be helpful.' But it brings little cheer to four private IVF centres, whose numbers have fallen by up to 30 per cent in the last quarter, compared to the same period in 2007.

Said a Raffles Hospital spokesman: 'The impact of the subsidy has been to encourage local IVF patients to choose government hospitals over private hospitals.'

That and the recession have dealt a double whammy to private fertility centres, said Gleneagles IVF Centre's director, Dr Christopher Chen.
Private centres will now also have a higher proportion of patients aged 40 and above, who are not eligible for the subsidy, said Thomson Fertility Centre's medical director, Dr Cheng Li Chang.

This would have a negative impact on the centres' published rates of success, as older women have more difficulties conceiving, he said.

Only Parkway Fertility Centre in Mount Elizabeth Hospital has seen IVF patient numbers grow, by 25 per cent last year over 2007, probably because of marketing efforts in the region, said its medical director, Dr Suresh Nair.

The impact of the subsidies on the national fertility rate remains to be seen. The Health Ministry would only say there had been a 'slight increase' in the total number of assisted reproduction cases since August, but 'it is too early to make any conclusion'.