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Making sense of health care
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Illinois egg donor agencies offer guarantee

Three egg donor agencies in Illinois have joined forces to offer a first-in-the-nation guarantee for would-be parents: If a young woman who agrees to provide eggs to an infertile couple changes her mind, they can select another donor at any of the agencies for a relatively minimal fee.

The cooperative arrangement, launched last week, comes amid anecdotal reports that more women are inquiring about becoming paid egg donors in the current economic downturn. Even before the financial crisis, this niche of assisted reproduction was growing rapidly, fueled in part by older couples trying to have children.

The practice calls for a donor—typically a young woman—to undergo drug injections that stimulate the production of multiple eggs, which physicians harvest from her ovaries and fertilize with sperm. Resulting embryos are then implanted in a would-be mom or a surrogate.

Sometimes young women agree to become a donor and then back out because they get a new job, are accepted in graduate school, fall in love, or simply get cold feet, said Nazca Fontes, president of ConceiveAbilities in Chicago, one of the three participating agencies. The others are Alternative Reproductive Resources in Chicago and The Center for Egg Options in Northbrook.

A young woman also might become ineligible to continue if she discovers during medical testing that she has an unexpected condition such as Hepatitis B or a recessive gene for an illness such as cystic fibrosis, said Robin von Halle, president of Alternative Reproductive Resources.

And sometimes, a donor ends up producing too few or too many eggs. In the former case, she may decide to bow out or the drug dose may be adjusted. In the latter, young women are encouraged to stop the process because hyper-stimulation of the ovaries can have serious medical consequences, von Halle said.

All three agencies say they screen young women to weed out those unlikely to follow through for practical, emotional or medical reasons. But each organization reports that up to 10 percent of young

women selected as donors end up unable to fulfill the commitment.

For couples, the disappointment can feel devastating, especially if they're ready to have a baby and have searched hard for a donor who feels "just right," Fontes said.

Through the new Shared Donor program, the three agencies can offer such couples a wider array of potential donors, enhancing the prospect of a timely new match. Nancy Block, president of The Center for Egg Options, said the agencies had been helping each other informally but recently "realized we should be doing this routinely."

Typically, if an egg donor doesn't pan out, a couple gets back most of the money promised to the young woman for her time and effort. Donor fees are about \$7,000 in the Chicago area; usually, all but \$1,500 will be returned.

But agencies don't offer refunds on their administrative fees, about \$5,000 on average. For access to another agency's donor list, they previously would have to put that amount down a second time. The Shared Donor program eliminates the extra charge and substitutes one-time \$400 fee per family.

Separately, Block said she's seeing a 30 percent increase in young women expressing interest in becoming donors, inspired by the bad economy. "\$7,000 is a lot of money these days," she observed.

On the other hand, despite substantial costs (insurance doesn't pay for egg donor or agency fees in Illinois), Block hasn't seen fewer families calling. "They all still want to have babies," she said.