



56-year-old mom sparks moral debate

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The birth of twins this week to a 56-year-old New Yorker has triggered a debate over whether older women should cheat nature and whether their children would be cheated as a result.

"There are reasons women have birth later in life, but it becomes an ethical question about what are you treating," said Cynthia Ziemer, an Oak Park clinical psychologist who counsels women and couples seeking egg donors. "Menopause is not a disease."

On Tuesday, Aleta St. James gave birth to twins, just days shy of her 57th birthday. She is believed to be the oldest woman in America to give birth to twins. They were conceived through in vitro fertilization using donor eggs.

Mary Mahowald, a medical ethicist at University of Chicago, said an older, postmenopausal woman seeking to have children carries heavier moral implications than a young woman seeking infertility treatments.

"The latter case addresses the situation of a woman who does not have the ability that a healthy woman would have, whereas the treatment of a 56-year-old woman is not the treatment of a condition," she said. "I think it's more akin to cosmetic surgery for a woman that age. It's medicine as a commodity."

Women and couples choosing to have children at a later age face a host of compounded health and social issues. Older parents must consider their own mortality sooner and make decisions on life insurance, guardianship and financial stability for their children, Ziemer said.

Dr. Mary Wood Molo, a reproductive endocrinologist at Rush University Medical Center, said an older woman must consider what will happen if she dies while the child is still young.

"Couples worry about putting small amounts of money into college funds, but someone who starts the process at an older age is going to need to be aggressive," she said.

Rush doctors see between 12 and 20 women a year over the age of 47 considering an egg donor, Wood Molo said. For each of these high risk cases, doctors work to make sure the women understand the financial and emotional implications. They often suggest a woman see a psychiatrist.

"We sort of let them know what child care costs so they can make a decision from a social side, responsible parent side, and financial side," she said. "I don't think it's just a scientific decision people have to make in this thing. I think they have to decide how they want to parent and if they want to parent."

Older mothers have increased chances for high blood pressure and diabetes during pregnancy, Wood Molo said. However, concerns about the babies' health are not compounded by the mother's age, since the eggs are from young donors, she said.

Nancy Block, owner of the Center for Egg Options Illinois, which matches egg donors and recipients, said there are few programs in Illinois that will work with women over 50. Those that do follow strict doctor's requirements.

"By the time they come to an egg donor recruitment agency, their doctor requirements should have been fulfilled, and some doctor's requirements include a psychological evaluation," she said.

The debate also raises issues of women's rights and family values, Ziemer said. And as long as people look to technology for medical solutions, ethical debates will continue.

"We are also in a society where we are in denial of our own aging," she said. "We are in denial of life's limits. If we are having children through technology, are they just commodities? Are they just products?"