The End... or your beginning?

Specialising in fertility treatment, gynaecology, male and female health care

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The Agora Book of Fairy Tale Endings

the Agora
Where life begins
Once upon a time...

This book contains a collection of true life fairy tale endings from our patients here at the Agora.

Personally written to provide support and encouragement to people who want to become parents but need a little help to create their own true life fairy tale.

Hope
By Laura Alford

At first as tiny as a seed, you grew bigger by the day,
Every day we counted, every day we’d pray.
Every little butterfly, every twinge or flutter,
Every little craving, for gherkins and peanut butter.
Every time we closed our eyes and pushed away our fears,
Every time we wished so hard then wiped away our tears.
Every time we look at you staring up at us,
Every day we remind ourselves never to give up.

These poems were written by Laura Alford, one of our Nurse Administrators, who has had a great deal of face to face and telephone contact with our patients over her years at the Agora. Laura loves writing poetry and felt inspired to dedicate these two poems to our book. She adds “I am extremely passionate about facing infertility and the journeys that people take to complete their family. I think it is too easy to judge and just offer reassurance when things are not working out, but facing infertility is so much more than just not being able to have a baby. So much more! The emotional roller coaster is mammoth, Unless you have experienced it, you will never fully understand the impact it can have. It’s about, loss, grief, failure, disappointment, fear, joy – all of these things and so much more and it should be treated with the respect it deserves!”
Caitlin - the Agora’s first baby

By Lorna

Our eldest child, James, has cerebral palsy which was caused by a difficult birth involving an emergency caesarean. After he was born, life was very busy and although Richard (my ex-husband) and I knew we wanted a second child, we put it to the back of our minds as we attended an endless round of appointments with James.

A few years after James was born, we started trying for another baby but nothing happened and, almost before we knew it, James was approaching 10. At this point, we realised that we needed to get on and find out if there was a reason why I wasn’t conceiving, so our GP referred us to the local hospital. After various tests, they found that one of my fallopian tubes was narrow and scarred, which was a possible reason. The Agora wasn’t yet open and the only option at that time was to go to London for treatment; however, that would have been very difficult to fit around James’s many appointments. Fortunately, my consultant at the time mentioned that the Agora was going to open shortly and, if I could hang on a while, I might be able to have my treatment there. Although time wasn’t on my side – I was by now 39 – we decided to wait, and so it turned out that we were among the first to be treated there.

I was very excited about our first visit; everything was brand new and from the start we felt as if we were being welcomed into a family. The staff were so friendly and positive; I didn’t know much about IVF at that time but when we met Carole, Mel and the team they explained everything so clearly and made us feel so comfortable. The clinic itself was lovely, not at all like a hospital environment. They put us at ease and made us feel that we were in the best hands. We were confident that if anyone was going to be able to help us, it would be the Agora team. As well as their medical expertise, they were also lovely to James and they seemed to feel empathy for our situation. And so our journey began…

After some initial tests, Carole and the team explained what they felt would be the best treatment plan. They explained everything so clearly at every step of the way and reassured us that we could phone them at any time. We felt well supported, confident that they were there for us, and wanted us to be successful as much as we did. This made the treatment process easy when it could so easily have felt bewildering and overwhelming.
I started a course of IVF; it was easy living near the clinic and not having to travel to London. On days when James wasn’t well and was off school, we could bring him with us, which also took a lot of the pressure off. The medical procedures, such as egg collection, didn’t feel daunting and not for one moment did I feel nervous. Afterwards, they phoned to tell me they had harvested two eggs and they could put one back in (the other was frozen). I was surprised and a bit disappointed that there were only two eggs but I was told that they were good quality. Carole and the team were always very honest and realistic about the chances of success so I knew that nothing was guaranteed, especially taking into account my age. They didn’t always tell us what we wanted to hear, but it was better to know the reality; at the same time, everything was being done to make sure we had the best chance of success.

After the implantation, I had to wait what seemed like a very long two weeks before I could do the pregnancy test. At the back of my mind, after the years we’d been trying when nothing had happened, I didn’t want to pin my hopes on success but at the same time I felt there was a glimmer of hope. It would also be the first baby born as a result of treatment at the clinic, so we felt that everyone was waiting with us for the first Agora baby!

Two weeks later, I remember getting up early to do the pregnancy test alone, but I found I couldn’t bear to look at it. Instead, I handed it to Richard. When he said it was positive, I still couldn’t believe it. So I did another two tests – both showed I was pregnant. Then I phoned the clinic and spoke to Mel. And when I told her she couldn’t believe it either! It seemed such a miracle after so long – we were all so excited. It was amazing.

After the initial euphoria of discovering I was pregnant, it began to dawn on me that it was still early days and that we had a long journey ahead of us. This was brought home to me when we had the first ultrasound scan: the team were concerned that the baby was smaller than normal. This made me feel a bit anxious, but we tried to stay positive. After that, every time I went for a scan it all seemed to be going well and Caitlin was growing without any problems.

Throughout my pregnancy, I stayed in touch with the Agora; because of James’s difficult birth, the consultant at the hospital (who also worked closely with the Agora team) arranged for me to have a caesarean and deliver our baby himself. So our daughter Caitlin – and the Agora’s first baby – arrived. A few days later, we proudly carried her into the clinic so that everyone could share in our joy - what a reception we received!

I look at her now and I know she’s my little miracle. We were so lucky to have her on our first attempt and it’s been amazing for James to have his little sister.

The End
Lexi is my miracle

By Kerrie

Lexi is my miracle. My husband, Ant, was diagnosed with advanced cancer before we had had a chance to conceive our much-wanted child. Before he passed away, and with the help of the Agora, we were able to freeze some sperm so that, if I couldn’t become pregnant straight away, I could conceive a child after Ant’s death. Although we attempted IVF while Ant was still alive, sadly it wasn’t successful. However, I was finally able to become pregnant some months after Ant had passed away. There are really no words to describe the joy of finally being pregnant, going on to give birth to a healthy baby girl, and knowing that I have a part of Ant to live on with me. Below is a letter that I wrote to Lexi to explain how special she is. Before I became pregnant with Lexi, I really wasn’t sure that IVF was going to work and I had pretty much decided that if this last round didn’t work then I would have to stop.

Dear Lexi Madison Antonia

You know that you were named after Daddy? This is a letter to explain how special you are, and about how you came to be born after daddy had died.

Daddy and I had always talked about having children and, for some reason, we always knew we’d have a little girl. Even when we were on our honeymoon, we bought those teddies and that little turtle with the big eyes especially for you.

Mummy and Daddy wanted you very much but we asked the Agora Clinic for help because when Daddy became very poorly with cancer it was too difficult for us to have a baby by ourselves. We really wanted Daddy to see a picture of you on the scan while you were in Mummy’s tummy, but sadly this was not to be. He passed away, before I could become pregnant, on Sunday 29th April 2012 at St Barnabas Hospice with Mummy lying beside him and Nanny, Nan and Grandad Cox there. But luckily, before Daddy died, the Agora Clinic told us that they could make a tiny ‘you’ using Mummy’s egg and Daddy’s seed, which they had kept safely at the clinic.
So, even though Daddy wasn’t there, Mummy could still have some treatment called ‘IVF’ to become pregnant and grow you in her tummy until you were big enough to be born. I felt so sad when Daddy died but knowing that I could still have our baby was the thing that kept me going.

At first, the treatment didn’t work and Mummy was very disappointed. It took a few attempts and over two years before Mummy found out she was expecting you, on Monday 8th September. When that happened, the sad feelings that Mummy had when Daddy died began to get a bit better. Nanny was amazing, she had come to all of Mummy’s appointments at the Agora and when we found out I was pregnant we told everyone straight away. Aunty Heidi (who screamed down the phone with happiness), Grandad and Nana Dawn and all my friends. I couldn’t stop looking at the pregnancy test stick to see the positive response. I was so happy!

While I was pregnant I had two feelings. I was very happy but I was also a bit worried that something would go wrong. But it was amazing when I could feel you moving around and kicking. Everyone was very supportive and the midwives were great. They knew how special you were so, whenever I was worried, they would listen for your heartbeat and check you were OK.

You were born exactly three years after Daddy’s funeral. My labour started at midnight on the Friday, I was at home on my own so I called the hospital for some advice. I called Aunty Heidi just before six on Saturday and she answered straight away and came round to keep me company. I had a bath and something to eat before I went to hospital. Because there was some meconium, they told me to go in for about 8 o’clock. They monitored me and at about 8.30 I was halfway dilated. Nanny arrived. Heidi was so excited because you were early and she wasn’t expecting to be there because she would have been on holiday. It was quite quick after that and you were born at 12.09. Nanny and AH were both there and AH actually watched you being born. She was over the moon she was able to be there.

Having you in my arms was amazing, I couldn’t believe you were actually there and mine. I counted your 10 fingers and 10 toes. It was bittersweet because, although it was amazing to have you and hold you in my arms, at the same time it was so sad that your Daddy couldn’t be there to hold you too. I left you with Nanny for a while because I had to have a little operation to take out the placenta. Nanny loved having that time to bond with you.
Lexi is my miracle continued

You had so much hair, maybe that was why I had heartburn! We had to stay in overnight. Everyone was lovely. There were four mummies with new babies on the ward and those babies all had their Daddies too. I was feeling a bit lonely without your Daddy but everyone was so lovely, especially the midwives, and I told them all about your Daddy and how special he was and you were. I’m sure your Daddy would have cried with happiness when he saw you. I would have shown him how to hold you, he would have been worried about dropping you.

You’ve changed my life in so many ways. I am so much happier now that I have you and you constantly amaze me. You make me laugh so much, and it’s lovely to see the things that you are learning. Just this week you’ve learned to turn around on the spot and stamp your feet. The way you look at me when you’ve done it, with that big grin, I couldn’t imagine life without you.

Your eye colour is the same as Daddy’s and you have his ‘widow’s peak’, that V-shaped hair in the middle of your forehead. And there are some photos of Daddy in the Memory Book that we made, where he has just the same expression as you sometimes have.

When you’re older I hope that you understand the reason why I still had you, even though Daddy couldn’t be here for you, and how much both of us wanted you. Daddy wanted a child so badly even though he couldn’t be here for you and he loves you very much. He did record some stories for you: Guess How Much I love you, The Very Hungry Caterpillar and Dear Zoo. He got some of the words wrong and there’s a few swear words on the recording too! Although I haven’t been able to bring myself to play those stories to you yet, one day we’ll listen together so you can hear his voice.
If your Daddy met you today, I know he would love you so much and that you would wrap him around your little finger! He would be besotted with you. And I know he would be very, very proud of you. As you grow up I want you to be happy and confident and know how much you are loved and wanted. And, even though your Daddy isn’t here, and it’s just me and you against the world, that you won’t feel like you have missed out on too much.

I love you baby girl

The End
The Long Road to Motherhood

By Liz

I’d wanted to have children for as long as I can remember. Even in my teens, I consciously noted things I enjoyed and planned to replicate those experiences for my offspring. I imagined it would all just fall into place and, at the age of about 15 when asked to write my life plan at school, I remember mapping out that I would go to university at 18, start my career at 21, marry at 25 and start my family a year or two later. It all seemed so simple.

The university and career bit happened on schedule and I even got as far as a serious relationship at the age of 22, which lasted until I was 27. So, the first departure from the plan was the end of that relationship, with part of the reason being that my boyfriend knew how much I wanted children but didn’t feel ready for that commitment.

I continued on a successful career path and kissed an awful lot of frogs in the hope of finding my prince. However, years passed and I began to realise that life was not like the fairy tales and that I was going to have to do something drastic myself in order to try to realise my dream. I analysed my life and realised that I was not meeting the sort of guys with whom I was likely to make a permanent relationship. I was working in the arts, spending my spare time singing in semi-professional choirs, and the guys I might have been interested in just weren’t available. So, aged almost 33, I changed my job and started socialising with new people. To cut a very long story short, it worked! I met Rob the next year and we married when I was 35.

It still wasn’t all plain sailing, though. Some months before we got married I noticed a hard lump in my belly which turned out to be fibroids (growths from and within the wall of the uterus). I was referred to a specialist who told me about various surgical treatments, but who advised us (when we told her that we hoped to have children) that due to the risk to my fertility, I should avoid having treatment. We started trying for children on our honeymoon, but a few more years passed and nothing happened. The most difficult thing to deal with was that the fibroids actually made me look pregnant and on at least one occasion we were congratulated and asked when the baby was due. The mass was at least the size of a 12-week foetus and I got used to broken nights due to pressure on my bladder, just as if I was expecting.
I was almost 39 when we were referred to a fertility consultant at our local hospital and were offered IUI (intrauterine insemination). We did five cycles, but although I was ovulating fine, this was difficult to spot because the fibroids were so big that they were often in the way, meaning that my growing follicles didn’t show up when they scanned me. The consultant advised a myomectomy – an incision similar to a caesarean section and then surgical removal of the growths - and I was operated on a few months before my 40th birthday. The surgeon removed several non-malignant fibroids of various sizes, thankfully all in the wall of the uterus, so he had not needed to cut into the cavity itself. He also reported a number of smaller ‘seeds’ of fibroids which were likely to grow in the future and he’d noticed endometriosis while he was sewing me up, which could affect my fertility. I took two months to recover from the operation and as soon as I was fit enough I returned to see my fertility consultant. I was now within a month or so of my 40th birthday and knew that the local NHS would only fund IVF for women under 40. So, with absolutely no time to spare, I was put on the list for IVF and soon enough we started the next chapter of our journey.

We attended a local hospital for our first IVF cycle, where the consultant talked us through the procedure. It was clear that my age was already against us (only around a 1 in 5 chance of conception), but we had to believe that it was going to work. The cycle seemed to go well with a number of follicles responding to the drugs and a reasonable ‘harvest’ of eggs, but in the laboratory stage we only managed to create one embryo, which was graded at approximately 2.5 out of 4, meaning ‘possibly viable, but not great’. It was transferred into my womb and we embarked on the two-week wait before we could do a pregnancy test, but sadly it didn’t implant.

Over the next two years we completed another three unsuccessful IVF cycles; one more at the local hospital and then two at the Agora. The first cycle at the Agora (our third cycle) was particularly hopeful, with three viable blastocysts (embryos which have continued to develop for five days and are therefore more likely to make it) transferred. Sadly none of them survived, though for two weeks I was able to dream that I might be carrying triplets. I even have a print of the microscope image of those three little lifeforms which was taken just before they were transferred, the three tiny groups of cells which were the children created by me and Rob. The relative success of that third cycle spurred us on to give it one more go, but our fourth attempt was spectacularly unsuccessful. Despite a very good follicle response and high hopes, none of the eggs were mature enough to be fertilised and it became clear that my eggs were now too old for a successful outcome. This reflects the national statistics regarding declining fertility (at 42, around 1 in 10 and by 45, less than 1 in 100).
Our fairy tale ending

The Long Road to Motherhood continued

We went away pretty heartbroken. We had managed to be fairly level-headed throughout our fertility treatment journey and had always put our relationship first, keeping a healthy balance of other interests in our lives, but this did seem to be the end of that particular road. We started thinking about adoption or fostering, both of which seemed pretty complicated and difficult to start considering our ages (me 42; Rob 47).

Then one of those once-in-a-lifetime things happened. A much younger friend, Amy, who had been aware of our fourth IVF cycle, asked me how it had gone. I told her it had failed and why. While hugging me to console me she whispered in my ear that she wanted me to try again with her eggs. Up until that time I hadn’t considered using donor eggs, but Amy was – and is – everything I wanted to pass on to my child. Not only is she beautiful, but she shares most of my passions, interests and talents. With tears in my eyes I mumbled back to her that she didn’t know what she was offering and I couldn’t possibly accept, but if she wanted to learn a bit more about what could be involved I’d love to discuss it over a coffee. That coffee happened – as did a number of others over the next few months – and we explored the whole subject of IVF with all the practical, physical, ethical and personal issues which we would have to consider if we did create a child. At the end of all that, amazingly, she was still game, so I took her to meet my consultant at the Agora and we embarked on the mandatory counselling and blood tests for all three of us to ensure we were compatible. The results were all positive but we then decided to wait another six months to ensure we were all certain about it and to find a time which best fitted in with our lives. My biological clock was no longer an issue as the eggs would now be from a 25-year-old (more than a 50% chance of success) but I still couldn’t believe my luck that I had such a selfless and generous friend!

So, in September 2009 we embarked together on an IVF regime, my fifth cycle. I had to take HRT drugs to down-regulate my body and get my cycle in harmony with Amy’s and then she started her injections. I was amazed that someone would willingly go through that for me; she was truly wonderful. Everything seemed to be going well, but we were careful to keep the pressure off in the same way as we had managed our previous cycles. It was simply an amazing secret. We all went to the clinic together on the day of the egg collection and were delighted to hear that the harvest was good. The three of us went out for dinner together that night to celebrate and five days later, at the end of October, I had one of six viable blastocysts transferred into my uterus. We were firmly advised against having any more transferred as the chances of the IVF working were now so high, due to the potential in Amy’s eggs. One last two-week wait – but this time a positive outcome! I couldn’t believe it.

I spent a lot of the early part of the pregnancy expecting something to go wrong. As well as having experienced so many setbacks, I knew that my Mum had miscarried many times before she had managed to have me and my brother, so I feared the worst. However, apart from one small (but very scary) bleed at six weeks, everything went swimmingly.
I didn’t even get morning sickness! Slowly, but surely, my belly filled out and I gradually began to acknowledge that I was actually going to have a baby. I can’t tell you how excited I was! Rob was able to attend quite a few of my antenatal appointments and Amy came to one scan too. I decided early on that I wanted to know the gender of my baby to help me with the bonding process, given that it was not genetically mine – and we were all delighted to find out that I was carrying a girl.

My bump had been measuring big throughout the pregnancy and my 20 week scan confirmed from the femur length and tummy circumference that I was carrying a bigger baby. Various IVF and early antenatal scans had also picked up that some more fibroids had, indeed, developed. I really wanted a normal vaginal delivery, ideally a water birth, and I had an extra scan at 34 weeks to check that the fibroids would not prevent this. Everything seemed OK; at 36 weeks the baby was transverse, but she turned head down by 38 weeks. Phew! My obstetrician had told me she was keen that I should deliver by or on my due estimated delivery date (EDD) as there was a slight, though increasing, risk of a still birth the longer we left it.

On my EDD nothing was happening. There wasn’t the potential for a membrane sweep as my cervix hadn’t softened at all and my fibroids meant I couldn’t be induced as the potentially more violent contractions could have caused very serious bleeding. We were persuaded to agree to an elective caesarean section five days after the due date if there was still no action. At that point something inside me knew I would not go into labour and we prepared ourselves for a very different birth to the one we had planned. We even went out to dinner the night before the caesarean section to celebrate our last night before parenthood.

I won’t go into the birth story here – I could fill many pages. Despite it not being the birth we had wanted, it was an incredibly positive experience and I couldn’t praise the staff at our local hospital enough. Both Rob and Amy were allowed into theatre and the three of us celebrated the birth of our wonderful daughter, Georgina, just before 9.30 am on 23 July.

Up until Georgie’s birth we had told friends that we had managed to get pregnant via the most amazing gift of egg donation, but with no details. Once we knew we had achieved our goal we started to reveal Amy’s identity to our mutual friends. I am really keen that people recognise what an incredible thing she has done for us. Amy is one of Georgie’s godmothers and we will tell Georgie as soon as she is ready to understand how she was created – and how much she was wanted.

The End
Our fairy tale ending

Our story

By Maz and Lel

In our amazing fairy tale that came true, my wife Lel was the baker and I was the oven! But it wasn’t easy; it was one huge, long emotional rollercoaster that took us five years, blurred with the craziness of our raging hormones, to complete.

It all started when we went to see our GP to ask for help to have a baby, which we naively assumed we could get via the NHS. We were a bit taken aback to be told that, although we were married, it wouldn’t be possible to have any help via the NHS because we were two women. After we’d recovered from that shock, we went with bit of a hop, skip and a jump to the Agora, never imagining that becoming pregnant using donor sperm would be too much of a problem. Our plan was for me to become pregnant with my eggs the first time, and then for me to carry Lel’s eggs for a second pregnancy.

However, after some testing we discovered that, because my ovarian reserve was next to nothing, there was no point using my eggs. So we decided I’d carry Lel’s egg instead.

The first hurdle in having treatment was that it involves a lot of injections – and Lel had a massive needle phobia. The first time we came home, with our needles and medication, there we were: two women with huge amounts of hormones surging about, and then Lel having to get over stabbing her leg with a needle. That first injection took hours. At that point, we didn’t think we’d get through it, but it got easier.

The Agora collected a lot of eggs from Lel’s first collection, and some embryos were also frozen for later. The sperm came from the European Sperm Bank. So there I was with the perfect little ‘house’, ready to rock and roll, and Lel had the perfect egg; we never imagined we’d have any problems conceiving but, to our surprise, our first course of IVF was unsuccessful. Then we had a second go a few months later using our frozen embryos, but that didn’t work either. And nor did the third.
We went back to see Carole who suggested I should be tested for ‘Natural Killer’ cells. The clinic was able to offer tests and treatments based on the idea that immune cells in your body can ‘reject’ a foetus and prevent a successful pregnancy. Carole was very clear about the fact that this isn’t proven, although the results of treatment for some people have been good; and we felt it was worth a try. Treatment involves something that’s been called ‘mayonnaise baby’ because it involves having three infusions, over a period of several weeks, of soya oil and egg yolk. Who would think that was going to work? However, I did become pregnant with twins but sadly I miscarried one at six weeks and the other at eight weeks. It was horrendous.

Having now had four unsuccessful attempts at becoming pregnant, I was thinking, I am no good, I can’t do this, my body is saying no. So we were considering Lel having a go at carrying the baby, but at this stage we’d also used up all the donor sperm and embryos.

We decided to take a long holiday so we went to see my parents in Australia for Christmas, the best medicine we could possibly have wished for. We were scraping around to raise the funds for more treatment and we were writing to various MPs, hospitals and even The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) because it seemed so unfair that there was no help via the NHS, but we got nowhere.

The following February we went back to discuss with Carole what to do next. She said she believed we’d just had bad luck miscarrying, like many women do. Because Lel had polycystic ovaries the chances of her miscarrying were also pretty high and we joked that, between the two of us, we are one quite good woman!

We found another sperm donor and Lel went through everything again. We were both on loads of hormones, but she became a superstar with needles, even though she still hated them. I was giving myself huge progesterone injections into my backside, I counted 98 injections for just this round of IVF! And I ended up taking my injections everywhere with me – I was injecting in people’s homes, in restaurants, everywhere - it was full on! But we were both still pretty positive and the clinic was able to harvest some good quality eggs. When the embryos were being transferred into my womb, I made a joke that they should glue them in and was amazed when Carole actually asked someone to pass the embryo glue! But it wasn’t a joke, and the twins were actually glued in.
After implantation, we were told not to test for 10 days but we couldn’t wait and tested after only three, seeing the faintest line you’ve ever seen in your life. Then we tested again and it was a tiny bit darker, then I think we went through about 15 more tests, we were so desperate for the embryos to stay! I was scanned at three weeks with the twins but I had bleeding and severe pain at six weeks and thought we’d lost them. We went to hospital and I was kept in overnight but, to our amazement, the scan picked up two heartbeats! We couldn’t believe it!

We spent the rest of the pregnancy feeling really nervous and there was more bleeding at 10 weeks, but it was fine. I had high blood pressure at 32 weeks so I had to go into hospital, and at 34 weeks and six days our twins were born via caesarean. It was incredible to finally meet our little boys. One of them had to stay in Intensive Care for 12 days, which was stressful, but both of them have grown into healthy babies.

There were times when having treatment was pretty tough on our relationship and other times when the whole experience brought Lel and me really close together. We learnt to go easier on each other when we needed to, even though our hormones were raging. It was a five-year emotional rollercoaster but I was there for her needle phobia, and she was there for my hormonal craziness.

Being at the Agora, we became pretty close to Mel and some of the nurses. We are a very easy going couple; there were times when we were in Carole’s office in tears, but we always tried to lighten things up as well, and we felt as if we’d made really good friends there. We couldn’t have wished for anything better. Of course, we were leaving the clinic totally deflated at times, but they always helped us believe we could do this, and they always explained what we needed to do to get to the next step. We are lucky, we can see the funny side about most things and I think that was important because having this treatment takes over everything.

For us it was the most full-on thing in the whole world – yet the most rewarding, the most precious, and the most amazing experience. And the perseverance too – there were times when we really didn’t know if we could go through it again.

Our advice to other couples thinking of doing the same thing is that you need to support each other, be there for each other, don’t stop talking, cry as much as you need to, but if you are also patient and persevere you will get there.

The End
Snakes and Ladders

By Teresa

The best way I can think of to explain my journey to having a child is to use the analogy of the board game ‘Snakes and Ladders’. Before I could even start to move along the board, I found I had to roll a six to get the go-ahead to try and fall pregnant, then I could move slowly along the board, climbing a ladder when we made progress; from seeing consultants, to getting test results back and finally to falling pregnant, which enabled me to climb yet another ladder as I could then count off each week of my pregnancy.

Every time I found myself on this board climbing higher and higher, I imagined that I would go on to conquer the board and win the ultimate prize – a baby – but then time and time again I would feel as if I’d landed on a snake, sliding back down to the very beginning where I would have to roll another six before I could start all over again.

The irony of this is that I have a phobia of snakes…

My story is that I suffered from recurrent miscarriages. Words cannot really describe the frustrations, despair, hurt and anger I felt whenever I miscarried or had to wait for tests to be carried out. At times I didn’t recognise the person I’d become, even though I tried to keep a smile on my face for my family and close friends to hide my true feelings. I know that they were worried about me and, as time went on, questioned whether it was time to stop and accept it wasn’t ever going to happen for us. However, I wasn’t ready to give up.

It’s a long story, far longer than we’d hoped when we decided the time felt right to try for a baby in 2004. It seemed that we’d rolled that six straight away when I found I was pregnant within a month of trying. But it took a further eight years and nine miscarriages – including an ectopic pregnancy resulting in the removal of one of my fallopian tubes – before my tenth pregnancy finally brought us Olivia.

That moment, each time, when I would discover I was pregnant was like throwing a six to begin the game, only to hear the same words between six and eight weeks later, “I am so sorry but there isn’t a heartbeat, I’m afraid this pregnancy will not progress”, and down the metaphorical snake I slipped again.
I felt so alone. Despite being supportive, my husband Chris wasn’t experiencing the rollercoaster of emotions caused by my hormones. When, after my third miscarriage, I was diagnosed with Primary Antiphospholipid Syndrome (PAPS) I knew it was a step forward so, full of hope, I started treatment that offered a 70% chance of a successful pregnancy; but, when my fourth pregnancy resulted in yet another miscarriage, I realised I was one of the 30% - and a miscarriage statistic.

After my eighth miscarriage, I went for 18 months without falling pregnant. This was something new, I’d always been able to fall pregnant before. My family were telling me that I should stop trying because of how I was feeling, going through so many bereavements.

But I didn’t feel ready to stop, so as a last resort I went back to see my GP, expecting to be told there was no more that could be done. To my surprise I was referred, via a consultant at the local hospital, to the Agora. It was such a surprise because I didn’t expect anyone else to be able to help me. After all, I could get pregnant, it was just keeping the babies that was the problem. So I was really surprised to be told that I would be eligible to have fertility treatment at the Agora via the NHS. Until then, I hadn’t realised that a fertility clinic could help someone with recurrent miscarriages but the care and support that I received from the team is something I will never forget.

Coming to my first appointment at the Agora was more like stepping into a spa than a clinic. After the manic environment of NHS hospitals over the previous seven years, everything felt so calm. The nurse explained all our options, many of which we hadn’t known about; we were offered six attempts at IUI and four at IVF. I felt an overwhelming sense of relief and happiness that finally it was all going to happen…
While I was waiting for my first appointment at the Agora I had read an article published in the local paper about a woman who’d had a baby following 18 miscarriages. She’d been diagnosed with high levels of white blood cells, Natural Killer (NK) Cells, which were reacting to her foetuses as if they were foreign bodies, attacking them and causing her miscarriages. Like me, her miscarriages had taken place between five and eight weeks after conception. It’s not that widely recognised in the UK and when I’d mentioned it during one of my NHS appointments I’d been told it was very unlikely to be my problem. During that first meeting at the Agora they offered to give me the blood test to diagnose the condition (although it wasn’t available on the NHS and the blood test had to be sent to the US for analysis, so I needed to fund it myself). Two days later they called me to let me know I did have the condition and I was able to start steroid treatment to suppress the NK cells.

In my naivety, I assumed that now the problem had been diagnosed, I’d fall pregnant straight away. However, our first attempt at IUI was unsuccessful. That came as the biggest blow so far. I was devastated.

After the second attempt at IUI, I did fall pregnant – for the ninth time – but miscarried two days before the seven-week scan. And the third attempt at IUI had to be abandoned because all my eggs were on the left-hand side, where I had had my fallopian tube removed during an ectopic pregnancy some years before.

By now, it all seemed to be taking so long and I was feeling really disheartened. I was still allowed to have a further three attempts at IUI but was advised by the Agora that it might be better instead to start IVF to have the best chance of conception. Once you start IVF you can’t go back to IUI, so I struggled with accepting the advice that might mean I had fewer attempts overall at conception.

For the first round of IVF I had an amazingly high number of embryos and, because the chances of implantation were so high, I agreed to just have one implanted. Sadly that first attempt at IVF didn’t work out.

At the second round of IVF I was also offered an additional treatment, intravenous intralipids to treat the NK cells. This was an additional cost, not available on the NHS. It involved a nurse coming to the house to give me two rounds of treatment, which took around three hours, to suppress the immune system. And it worked! At the second round of IVF I fell pregnant for the tenth time and we were able to have a scan of our baby at around eight weeks.

I was never confident I’d keep the baby. Although I had an easy pregnancy, with no sickness, I was always on tenterhooks right up until she arrived. The NHS antenatal treatment was great and I was scanned more often than usual, which was very reassuring.
When Olivia arrived, the labour was so fast that she was almost born in the hospital car park! Holding her in my arms at last, I had a sense of disbelief - and even now I often have to pinch myself that it happened.

I decided to contact our local paper about my story, in the hope that it might help someone else. It ended up being covered by the national press, including an invitation to appear on a live morning TV show. I know that at least one other person has been helped by finding out about Natural Killer Cells; I hope it will change the lives of many others, and that this treatment will become more widely available.

And our baby? Olivia May has changed our lives. She is the most fantastic, precious little girl, who brings so much joy. She is a little performer who likes to sing and dance, and has settled really well into school. We’ve decided not to try to have any more children. We feel blessed to have Olivia and want to make sure she has the best possible start in life.

The journey – that game of snakes and ladders – has brought us every possible emotion: devastation, anger, and at times I didn’t recognise myself. It was hard to keep going and there were dark days when I was ready to give up, but the Agora was the light at the end of the tunnel for me and I can’t thank them enough.

The End
Our fairy tale ending

“I feel very privileged” – an egg donor’s story

By Faye

Caroline and I already had a son, Harry (conceived using artificial insemination at home) and when we decided to try for another baby we naively assumed that it would be just as easy the second time. However, two years later, it still wasn’t happening for us; although I’d become pregnant once, it had ended in a miscarriage. Over the following months, my goal of becoming pregnant became more and more stressful and upsetting, impacting on our day to day life.

I’d always felt positive about the idea of egg sharing although I didn’t initially know a lot about it. Being in a same-sex relationship, I knew that without people in the world who were prepared to be sperm donors, my children wouldn’t be here. Egg sharing was something I really wanted to do as a way of acknowledging this, and giving somebody the same opportunity that had been given to us.

The Agora explained the process to me – how I would be matched to a potential recipient if I was a ‘good’ candidate. I underwent some blood tests, and spoke at length to the nurse who ran the egg sharing programme, which helped me to feel certain that it was something that I wanted to do.

I was fortunate that I didn’t have any serious issues with my fertility. However, I did consider how I’d feel if, having been part of an egg sharing programme, the recipient became pregnant and I didn’t. I wondered if I would feel jealous or upset, or have any regrets about the decision.

With IVF, I feel that to some extent you’re either lucky or you’re not. I had presumed that the treatment would work first time. I believed that the odds were in my favour: I was under 30, I was healthy, and we had used a sperm donor with no known problems. Although success rates had been explained to me at my appointments, I believed that I would be one of the lucky ones. When I didn’t become pregnant on that first round of IVF egg sharing, but my recipient did, I was relieved at how positive I felt about the experience.
Although I was disappointed that the treatment had not worked for me, I felt so happy that it had been successful for the recipient – that someone else had got what they’d hoped for and it hadn’t been in vain. I had done my best to give us both the outcomes that we had wanted, and it had worked for her. We decided to do a second round of IVF and that I would share again. On that cycle, my treatment was successful and the recipient’s wasn’t. I felt so grateful and fortunate to be pregnant that I decided that I wanted to come back to the clinic, as soon as I was able, to carry out an altruistic donation – and I’ve since carried out two such cycles of donation.

People often ask me why I became an altruistic egg donor and the best way I can describe it is this: I will never have the opportunity to say ‘thank you’ to the people who donated sperm to help me have my amazing boys; but I can repay it going forward by giving someone else that same opportunity, to experience the happiness that our children bring us. I don’t know the outcomes of my altruistic egg donations, but I feel so privileged to have been able to give other women the opportunity to have a family of their own.

My twins were conceived using donor sperm via a clinic in Denmark that the Agora had given us details about. The egg sharing was similar to a regular IVF cycle except I had to be synched with the recipient using medication to ensure we were both in the right place at the right time for the treatment to be possible. The injections were nowhere near as difficult, obtrusive or complicated as I’d thought they would be and I got used to injecting at the same time each evening with Caroline helping me; it wasn’t too painful either!

The egg collection itself wasn’t painful and I came round after the anaesthetic knowing that 50% of my eggs would now belong to someone else. I never found that difficult to accept; I always felt I was in it for both of us, and I was relieved that we both had enough to go forward with our treatments.

I also wrote a letter to any potential children so that, if they want to, they can access it when they are 18. If they want to contact me in the future that would be absolutely fine. I’ve kept a copy of the letter I wrote for my own children to read as well, so that when they are older they can understand that, for our family, me being an egg donor was an important part of our journey.
“I feel very privileged” continued

I have nothing but good things to say about the Agora. I’ve always been anxious about medical examinations, which was something I thought would be a problem, but the team went out of their way to support me and help me overcome any worries. They arranged for me always to have my scans carried out by the same person, which really helped with the anxiety, and I had access to a counsellor to discuss the egg sharing and donor process, although I never really felt I needed that kind of support. There were also lots of little acts of kindness from the team during my treatment and afterwards that meant so much to me. For example, when I had completed my first altruistic donation, the Agora sent me a beautiful bouquet of flowers. This was totally unexpected, and made me very emotional!

Sometimes, people seem shocked when I tell them about donating my eggs to someone else, and comment that they could never do that. That reaction surprises me because I feel very privileged to be able to put my hand up and say, I could do this and I did it. Those opportunities don’t come along very often in life, where you can do something just to help someone else, something that will bring them more happiness than anything else.

I am proud to have been an egg donor and I had a better outcome than I could have ever originally dreamed of; our family is complete and, via the Agora, I have been able to help others on their journeys to becoming parents too.

Our fairy tale ending

The End
Our fairy tale ending

‘Work in progress’ that eventually progressed

By Claire

Looking back, my fertility journey – which included five unsuccessful rounds of IVF before we got lucky on the sixth attempt – was a kind of ‘work in progress’.

Steve and I had been trying to have a baby for around a year before we were referred by my GP to the Agora for IVF treatment. Having had various tests to assess our chances of conception, we were told there was no obvious reason why we weren’t conceiving. While this was reassuring, it was also frustrating because it meant that no one could tell me why I wasn’t becoming pregnant. I had a number of blood tests, including a test for Natural Killer Cells, but they all came back normal.

We had a cycle of IVF every six months for three years and each time Carole and the team tweaked the treatment to try to cover another angle, something new that we hoped would work.

We just wanted to have a happy ending and we weren’t getting it. Looking back, I can see that it was all work in progress because, as expert as the team at the Agora are, they’re not magicians. They can’t just wave a magic wand and make you pregnant. And they’re dealing with all the different scenarios, all the variables that individuals present them with. But it was made a lot easier by the fact that the team were so lovely and so understanding and so on-board with us. They were always there to talk it through, regroup and with a plan to tackle it another way. After each unsuccessful cycle, we had a consultation with Carole, who guided us through the whole journey.

Going through an unsuccessful cycle of IVF can be difficult and disappointing. It’s a lengthy process – around eight weeks – and although in your mind you try not to get your hopes up, in your heart you’re desperate for it to work and when it doesn’t it’s really tough. One thing that helped us is that we decided to keep it quiet. We didn’t want our families and friends asking us how it was going, offering condolences when it didn’t work – even with the best intentions – we didn’t think that would help us. So we shared our disappointments quietly between ourselves.
On a practical level, the treatment also had its moments. Holidays and special occasions had to be planned to fit round the treatment and, for those three years, it pretty much took over our lives: I remember going to a wedding with my syringe, needles and medication, and disappearing to the loos to do an injection. But if it gets you what you want you don’t really care.

After our fifth unsuccessful attempt at IVF, Carole said she was very happy if we wanted to go to another fertility specialist and get a second opinion. So we went to a clinic in London for a consultation, but it was awful; such a different atmosphere. I knew then that, if anything was going to happen, if anyone was going to help us to be successful, it would be the Agora.

Before the sixth cycle, I remember asking Carole if it was worth going on. I said, be honest with me, am I a lost cause? She said no, there’s no reason why you’re not getting pregnant; we’ve just got to find the right way. And she was right; the next time we had success. On the cycle where we conceived our twin boys, I had a ‘scratch’ to the lining of the uterus which can help the eggs to embed and develop, and something known as an ‘intralipid drip’ which contained soya oil and egg products; and this time it worked for us. I was implanted with two eggs and we got twin boys!

My advice to someone thinking about having IVF treatment is to hang in there, however hard it might seem at the time, as long as you feel you’re emotionally and physically able to cope with it. Unless you’re really lucky and conceive the first time, there’ll be disappointment and heart break on many levels – both financial and emotional – but it’s not an exact science.

When I found I was pregnant, we waited until after our scan at the Agora to tell everyone we were expecting twins. I can still remember going in for that scan and Mel telling us that she was as nervous as we were. And then she told us we had two babies – it was wonderful, the moment we’d been waiting for, absolutely brilliant.

The End
My journey through breast cancer
By Sandra

I was diagnosed with invasive breast cancer shortly after I turned 36. At the time, I was planning to start a family and had already looked into the possible treatments offered by the Agora. Once I was diagnosed, I had the choice of whether or not to have chemotherapy as it was found early. I chose chemotherapy because I believed it would give me the best chance of survival; and, as far as I was concerned, it didn’t make sense to get pregnant without first doing everything possible to ensure I would be around to bring up a child.

Before I started my chemotherapy treatment, I went along to the Agora and the Medical Director, Dr Carole Gilling-Smith, advised that I could proceed with a natural cycle, fertilise the egg, and freeze it. Due to having oestrogen receptor positive cancer - and only a few weeks left before my treatment was due to start - IVF was not an option.

My egg stayed frozen while I went through chemotherapy, radiotherapy and then went on to start 10 years of Tamoxifen (a hormonal therapy). After being on Tamoxifen for a couple of years, my oncologist gave me his blessing to stop my treatment and to try for a baby. I was by now nearly 40 and running out of time, even without the complications of chemotherapy treatment.

I stopped taking Tamoxifen and came back to the Agora. The team were amazing and agreed to implant my (frozen) embryo. However, the embryo did not survive when it was defrosted which was devastating. I then embarked on two rounds of IVF, both of which were also unsuccessful. At this point, Carole suggested that I could maybe use a donor egg, but I wasn’t ready to give up.

Mel, Carole and the team at the Agora were incredibly supportive. They gave me all the information I needed at every stage of my treatment so that I could always make an informed choice. It was a really difficult time, I was incredibly worried about my declining fertility, and was conscious that I needed to get back on Tamoxifen as soon as possible. I was determined to have another two attempts and, at this point, Carole suggested trying intrauterine insemination (IUI), a simpler process than IVF. Although, in many cases this type of treatment may not be as successful as IVF, in my case it worked first time.
I think the most challenging part of my journey was picking myself up when things didn’t work out. There were some difficult decisions along the way, but I had a lot of support from my partner and family. The Agora team were also incredibly supportive through all the heartache - and I now have Nieve who is absolutely amazing!

I just hope my story can give hope to other women faced with a similar situation to me. If you do decide to try for a baby I wish you every success.

The End
Our fairy tale ending

My son Bear, one of the Agora’s first babies

By Katie

My son, Bear, was one of the first Agora babies. He was born as a result of intra-cytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) treatment 10 years ago.

My husband, Lee, and I had started trying for a baby as soon as we were married, but after a year nothing had happened. I wasn’t that surprised; I’d had some suspicions about my fertility because I’d had pelvic inflammatory disease in the past. I asked my GP to carry out some initial tests which came back fine, but as I was still worried I decided to have further tests at a hospital in London (the Agora hadn’t opened at this time). These tests showed that Lee had some anti-sperm antibodies, but unfortunately the way they told us the results was really unhelpful – we were just sent an email. This made us feel really worried and confused. Needless to say, we didn’t feel inclined to go back there for treatment.

Luckily for us, the Agora had just opened by this time and so we were among its first patients. I knew, as soon as I spoke to Mel, the Clinical Nurse Manager, on the phone that it was going to be the right place for us. She was incredibly helpful and reassuring, spending 40 minutes with me going through the email from the London hospital and explaining exactly what it meant. We later discussed all our options with both Mel and Carole, who advised us to begin ICSI treatment straight away. This treatment involved injecting a single sperm into an egg instead of conventional in vitro fertilisation (IVF) where many sperm are placed near an egg in a dish; in our case, the treatment also involved washing the sperm first to remove the antibodies, in order to give us the best chance of success.

Looking back, I was very lucky in lots of ways. I didn’t have any side-effects from the medication and, even though I was warned that I might have mood swings or anxiety, I didn’t get those either. My ovaries were working really well and there were 10 embryos, two of which were implanted. One of these resulted in a healthy pregnancy and the birth of our wonderful son. The most challenging part for me, it turned out, was managing my newborn: I’d been so obsessed with getting pregnant that I wasn’t really fully prepared to look after the baby – I became quite neurotic because I wanted everything to be perfect.

So my first experience with IVF was very easy and very positive. However, conceiving the twins wasn’t so easy…
After Bear was born, we decided to have a second baby using the frozen embryos that the Agora had stored for us; we had a frozen cycle around a year later and were surprised when that didn’t work. We completed a second and then a third cycle; these didn’t work either and, by this time, we’d used up all our embryos so we needed to have a fresh cycle. By this time, my egg reserve was very low – it had plummeted since that first egg collection two years earlier so there was no time to lose.

On the fifth round, with only two eggs left, we were delighted when I became pregnant with our twin boys. My initial reaction was relief, amazement - and then utter panic! Twin pregnancies carry a lot more risk and I was warned I might lose one. This really worried me and I was also concerned about the possibility of the twins being boys, which has ended up being wonderful despite my fears!

At least once every day I stop and think to myself how lucky I am - even after a sleepless night or when the children are arguing. That’s one of the brilliant things about IVF, it makes you grateful for ever. It’s helped me journey through some of those really challenging stages of parenthood because, in the end, they are our three wonderful bouncing boys, our incredible little gang.

I didn’t have any counselling or coaching during my own pregnancies, but I’d been a coach for 16 years, working in my own practice, with people from all walks of life. After I’d had my own children, an acquaintance, who was struggling to become pregnant, asked me if I could support her through her IVF journey and, since then, I’ve worked with a number of women who are facing the challenges of infertility. I’ve also been involved with running the Agora’s Patient Support Group for the past six months, which I really enjoy. Having been so lucky to have my three boys, I really enjoy being able to give something back to other women. Their stories are fascinating, they are so brave, and their journeys are truly inspiring.

The End
The emotional challenges of IVF and how one woman found solace in the sea

Alexandra’s Story

It was the needles that I was dreading most about IVF treatment. They’re the aspect everyone always asks you about. “Oh, God, do you have to do the injections? Do you do them or does your partner? How did you decide?” and so on. Then there’s the drama of its arrival. In my case, it was delivered by courier and a cool box was opened – puffing dry ice at me while I took the drugs to the fridge. I slipped the sealed bags of needles into my bedside drawer and waited until the Agora let me know it time to start. But it turns out that the needles are the easy bit. Once my husband had stared me in the eye and said, “If you had to do this to someone whose life depended on it, you’d find it easy…” that first tip slid into my abdomen like a hot knife through butter.

Significantly harder to overcome are the emotional challenges – and it was them that I was so ill-prepared to deal with. Not associating a referral for IVF with failure is the baby slope of the fertility slalom. While I know some find it difficult to accept that they need help, I had every confidence in the doctors who had referred us for treatment. I respected the specialists we were referred to and I was pretty relaxed about the fact that, as an otherwise healthy couple, we could overcome the challenges ahead with relative ease. I didn’t feel ashamed that we needed treatment back then – I just wanted to get on with it.

Things became trickier once the treatment itself began – and I realised that there were two, almost utterly incompatible selves that I needed to usefully be.
The first – the eternal optimist – needed to have every faith in treatment, and my ability to help it along with a positive mental attitude and healthy lifestyle. She needed to believe, to focus and, above all, as was repeated to me day after day, to relax. Relaxing on command is pretty tricky. Doing it when what the world seems to believe is your entire future happiness is at stake is all but impossible. “But it’s all you need to do!” people tell you, ad infinitum. “The doctors will take care of the rest!”

Reluctant to let myself, my husband or the Agora down, I committed to this optimism, to the green juices sprinkled with bee pollen and to the cancelling of holidays so that I could give it my all. I would be the Pollyanna who could manifest offspring by thinking the right way. Meanwhile, there was a second self. And she was busy with feverish eye-rolling at the entire fertility industry. This self despaired of the idea that anything should be compromised in pursuit of a baby. She had read the statistics; she knew that IVF – at this age – was very far from a guaranteed result. Consequently, she was reluctant to cancel plans, to submit to invasive treatment, to lose the early years of her marriage to what might be an impossible pursuit.

Above all, she refused to surrender to the idea that to not be a mother was to be a lesser person. This self knew with every fibre of her being that her friends who had not given birth – as a result of choice, fertility or sexual orientation – were no less empathetic, interesting or selfless than the parents. There was no secret club of which they weren’t a member. Sometimes, they could be just as tired, just as stressed or just as kind! This self even, from time to time, daydreamed about the fabulous, inspiring life she would lead when the IVF didn’t work.

Both of these selves were right, but it was a larger, more complicated and more thoroughly gruelling challenge that I had ever imagined to accommodate them in the same body. I longed to have a baby, I had never imagined not being a mother and I was filled with a chilly trepidation about navigating the alternatives. But, with equal, boiling fervour, I believed with every fibre that my sense of myself, my worth or the value of my marriage were not dependent on it. It was a choice, not a right.

Then came the drugs themselves. I had imagined that, within days, the “crazy hormonal behaviour” would begin. But the effects were significantly more subtle. Where I had foreseen a few days worth of injections followed by an identifiably “crazy with hormones” phase, the shift was instead slippery, amorphous and incremental.
Our fairy tale ending

The emotional challenges of IVF and how one woman found solace in the sea continued

The drugs never made me feel crazy, just a little… further away from myself, as if I were trying to relate to myself, and the world, from behind a thick layer of Perspex. And, with each fresh batch of drugs, each failure, each fresh tussle between the two equal selves I needed to be, I felt a little further away from who I actually was. The Perspex became thicker, a further layer was added and the world I used to live in seemed harder and harder to access.

I had fought – and enjoyed the fight – for a body I was proud of and now I saw a body that barely felt like mine at all. I missed the old me, I longed for the future me and I had no idea who the current me was supposed to be. Yet, against it all was the background of my swimming. An unlikely athlete anyway, I had learnt to swim in the year preceding our treatment and had surprised myself further by enjoying the cold water of the sea off Brighton as the seasons changed and the water became less hospitable.

And, in the sea, I found enormous solace. As I wrestled and wriggled against the idea that “all I had to do was to relax”, the salt and ice of the seawater began to feel like a safer, softer place to be than any other. When, after a break of several months and a lot more swimming through the coldest months of the year, we eventually chose to return to the clinic and use that final embryo, it decided to stay.

This spring, that embryo became one of us – a perfect baby boy. There is no connection between my swimming and my finally getting pregnant: after all it was the Agora that did the hard work there. But swimming, having a safe space to still feel like myself, helped enormously. Feeling as if your body is your own during a difficult time is a gift. These days, every time I kick in the water I think of feeling my baby kicking inside of me, and I know that I was both of those two selves all along. And now our family is three.
Alexandra Heminsley is a journalist, broadcaster and writer and author of Leap In: A Woman, Some Waves And The Will To Swim published by Hutchinson.
And they all lived happily ever after
Why do we need Fairy Tales?

This book of Fairy Tale Endings celebrates ten remarkable true stories about the journey to parenthood.

Fairy tales are usually written for children as ‘unbelievable or magical stories’ and most of the time they have a happy ending. I think it’s fair to say that, in the real world of IVF, the unbelievable happens more often than we – as professionals – care to admit; thankfully, this includes a fair share of happy endings. That is why I always stress to my patients: ‘however bleak the future appears, never lose hope’.

Doctors and scientists, as well as Dr Google, may provide the most detailed of statistics but each person is unique and responds differently to a particular course of treatment. That is why no one can really predict with complete certainty the outcome of any fertility treatment.

In gathering together these stories, our aim has been to instil hope to those already on that journey of assisted reproduction to parenthood; courage to those who are thinking about starting that journey; and delight as well as tears to those who have travelled that journey, whether successfully or not. I also wanted to share these stories with families and friends who witness the IVF journey from the sidelines, hopelessly unable to help but desperately trying to support, as well as those who have never even thought about what it really means to be unable to conceive.

In the last 25 years of my professional life, I have been extremely privileged to have witnessed, time after time, the amazing determination and courage of people struggling to conceive. Finding oneself unable to parent without medical help is hard in the 21st Century because, despite the huge progress made in talking about many health issues, childlessness remains a taboo subject. I think that’s quite remarkable, bearing in mind that infertility affects as many as one in six couples, and many more who need assisted conception to conceive via donor sperm, or as a result of cancer treatment.

Some other important facts

Fact one: the ability to reproduce is central to human wellbeing and happiness as well as to the survival of the human race.

Fact two: infertility impacts negatively on quality of life and the ability to fulfil many life plans and ambitions.

So, it’s not surprising that infertility also leads to a whole range of negative feelings; from anger, resentment, and depression to withdrawal and isolation. Over a period of time, it can also lead to physical health issues, as well as relationships breaking down, voluntary separation from friends and family, and even suicide. Yet, surprisingly, the NHS does not recognise infertility as a disease, which is why funding remains so rationed and postcode-dependent.
Assisted conception with a difference

When I set up the Agora, I saw this as our opportunity to offer assisted conception with a difference. My aim was to ensure that all our patients, as well as their partners, would feel special and unique - not just a number – and that they would be cared for in an individualised way, receiving the full emotional support that they needed to remain positive. You can’t change the reality of the situation when overcoming infertility requires medical intervention, but as a professional you can make a massive difference to how that intervention is offered.

My overriding aim is for our patients to feel as if they are being carried throughout their journey to parenthood, with advice and support available - either in person or via phone or email – at every step of the way. Each and every member of staff working at the Agora shares this philosophy and I know from reading the stories in this book, speaking to our patients, and reading the many letters and emails we receive, that most of the time we do get it right. So, whatever new treatments we may offer in the future, and however much or little NHS funding is available, we pledge to continue making the Agora journey a unique and very positive experience for everyone.

2017 – a very special year

It is fitting that our book of Fairy Tale Endings is published in 2017, a year that marks two anniversaries in the history of IVF overcoming infertility: the conception of the world’s first IVF baby, Louise Brown, in 1977, and the conception of the Agora’s first baby, Caitlin, in 2007. I am delighted that in this book we have her story, as well as other equally unique records about diverse fertility challenges: from overcoming recurrent miscarriage, to confronting cancer, through to giving new life to others through egg donation.

I am extremely grateful and very touched by all the contributors who so readily gave up their time to recount their experiences at the Agora as well as to our writer Suzi Lewis-Barned who carefully listened to our patients and put their stories together for us in this book.

Finally, I would like to thank my entire team, without whom none of these fairy tale endings could have happened.
Mel’s story

Melanie Callister is Clinic Manager at the Agora. Here, she talks about her work…

How long have you worked at the Agora?
I’ve been involved with the clinic for 11 years - since before it opened. At that time, I was working for a fertility clinic in London and commuting from Brighton. Strangely enough, all of the consultants at the London clinic knew about the Agora opening in Brighton, much closer to where I lived, but not one of them told me! However, when I did find out about it, I immediately contacted Carole and, after meeting her, began working here during a few of my days off – the rest is history.

What was it like in those early days?
At that time, the clinic was just a mass of empty rooms. We had to choose all the equipment and write the protocols, patient information, and consent forms ourselves! We were delighted when we sailed through our first inspections and we have continued to grow and develop our services ever since.

What do you do in a typical day?
I look after the organisation as a whole which includes managing my colleagues and working within the clinical areas, as well as taking responsibility for quality management and resourcing.

There really is no typical day. I might begin the day by carrying out egg collections and embryo transfers or I could be in the scan room doing follicle tracking, baseline or early pregnancy scans. On non-clinical days I will be in my office catching up with paperwork. I also get asked to see the patients with more complex needs to ensure the correct information is given and consent forms are in place.

What are the main challenges?
Juggling clinical work with managing staff can be hard. There’s only one of me – so I’m constantly having to prioritise my workload.

It’s also important to remember that each patient has a different outlook on life. You need to know when to cry with them; when to laugh; and when they need to be told, “No, I’m so sorry, this is how it is”. Getting this balance right can be really difficult. I know I don’t achieve this all the time, but I try to use my intuition to help me to understand what each person needs.

What do you find most rewarding?
The patients. That may sound clichéd, but on the whole they are lovely and appreciative. We all see our patients as individuals not ‘cases’, and I will always try to go out of my way to make sure that each one feels as if they are the only person in the clinic.
How would you describe your role?

With each patient, I feel as if I am setting out on a journey. Everyone has their own story: one may have been trying to achieve a pregnancy for 15 years, while another may only have been trying for five months. But for each woman, their journey is unique and they need to feel supported. I feel as if I’ve been given this opportunity to try in some part to help them achieve their dream, whether that is when I carry out their egg collection, transfers or scans – and that’s such a privilege.

When it goes well – whether that is with one or more attempts – it’s the most amazing feeling in the world and I feel that I’ve been able to contribute something. Not everyone is lucky enough to get that feeling in their job; it’s just amazing to be able to change people’s lives for the better. But, if it doesn’t work out, I still feel that I can be there for them in a positive way and our patient feedback shows that they feel well supported.

What’s the hardest part of the job?

Breaking bad news – and it doesn’t get any easier with time and experience. One of the toughest times for patients is the early pregnancy scan. All you want for them is some good news. But, when it’s not, there’s nothing worse than telling someone who’s so excited and amazed that they’ve come that far on their journey that their baby has died, that they don’t have a pregnancy. It’s the hardest part of the job because you can’t help feeling responsible in some way.

What’s the best part of the job?

Seeing parents when they come back to the clinic to introduce us to their new babies – and then receiving regular email updates as their children grow up. It’s so lovely to have that contact and continuity, even years later.

Why do you think the clinic is so successful?

The success of the clinic is down to patients feeling that we care about them and treat them as individuals. That’s the most important thing and I think we get that right. But I’m just one person in a massive team – the hardest working, most supportive team imaginable. Without us all working successfully together, there wouldn’t be a clinic. Carole has built a team that is trusted by patients and established a way of working where we all want to pull together to achieve the best possible outcomes.

What are you most proud of?

Getting the balance right between my different roles. From a management perspective, the other members of the team know that my door is always open and that I will be as fair and supportive as I can be. From a patient perspective, they get as much of my time as they need to ask whatever questions they want. I seem to get positive feedback, even in cases where people have given up on their journey to parenting, they have thanked me for making it as pleasant as possible.

What do you do to relax?

I do find it difficult to switch off because I find myself becoming so involved in something that’s so important to other people’s lives. But I do go to the gym, and I enjoy walking along the cliffs with my two lovely dogs, looking out to sea – while trying very hard not to check my emails!

Carole adds: “Much of the success of the Agora is down to Mel, not just because she does an amazing job every minute of every working day, but also because she is such a fantastic role model for all our staff.

“I am immensely proud of the fact that Mel’s hard work was recognised last year when she was awarded Employee of the Year at the Sussex Business Women Excellence Awards.”
A final word

Dreams
By Laura Alford

How easily I took it for granted,
How simple I thought it would be,
Leave home, get married,
Start a family.

It hit hard the realisation
My plans were not robust;
I watched my dreams of motherhood
Turning to dust.

How could this happen?
How could I fail?
This nightmare
Was once my fairytale.

Tests for my hormones,
Testing his sperm,
The results would indicate
Which way to turn.

Then it would be simple,
Eggs and sperm would meet,
In one easy step
Our family complete.

Seems nothing’s ever straightforward,
Or as simple as it seems,
But there is always hope,
And always dreams.

If at first you don’t succeed,
That is what they say;
It just may be that those dreams
Turn out another way.