

A GP enters fertile territory Medicine Weekly, Apr 15, 2008

A Galway GP is challenging sceptical colleagues to hear the science behind a fertility treatment he has been using for the last 10 years, writes **Michelle McDonagh**

Almost 800 babies have been born in Ireland over the past decade as a result of NaProTechnology fertility treatment, many to parents who had endured years of infertility and multiple recurrent miscarriages, according to Dr Phil Boyle.

Although the photos of healthy babies that line the walls of his rooms at the Galway Clinic are testament to the success of the treatment for some couples, the GP admits he is struggling to try to convince the broader medical community in Ireland.

But with a paper on NaProTechnology due to be published shortly in a peer-reviewed, scientific journal, Dr Boyle believes there's an increased likelihood fellow doctors will start to pay attention to the treatment.

"When I started out 10 years ago, I thought I would get a publication in the first few years. I have been trying to submit a paper on our research on and off for the last few years and am very close to getting one published now. This is key in terms of convincing my fellow physicians," he said.

NaProTechnology is an abbreviation of the term 'Natural Procreative Technology', which is described as a scientific, holistic process of investigating abnormal gynaecological and reproductive health. Proponents of the treatment, including Dr Boyle, claim it is particularly effective in treating infertility and recurrent miscarriages.

The technique, which was developed by American consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr Thomas W Hilgers, involves teaching women and couples how to monitor and record their biological markers of fertility in a precise and standardised fashion using a specific charting system.

Dr Boyle explained: "This information allows the physician who is trained in fertility care and NaProTechnology techniques to conduct a more thorough evaluation of the fertility cycle to identify abnormal menstrual bleeding patterns, poor cervical mucus flow and subtle hormonal deficiencies that are often not detected by routine gynaecological evaluation.

"Establishing a diagnosis is essential to NaProTechnology. You need to find the problem before you can fix it. Medical treatments are prescribed in a timed fashion with respect to the woman's cycle. The goal of treatment is to restore a normal appearance to the fertility chart and restore optimum fertility potential for the couple."

Dr Phil Boyle opened the first Irish fertility care clinic offering NaPro in Galway city in 1998 and he is currently based in the private Galway Clinic where he and two other doctors now provide the treatment. A fourth GP offers the treatment in Donegal while a fifth is in training in Cork at present. Consultant Obstetrician at Portiuncula Hospital in Ballinasloe Dr John Monaghan carries out any surgeries that may be required.

To celebrate their 10th anniversary in Ireland, Fertility Care Ireland (which is the foundation for NaproTechnology in Ireland) is hosting a weekend of celebrations in Galway.

The event kicks off with an infertility and miscarriage conference for health professionals at the Galway Clinic on Friday, 18 April at which NaPro founder Dr Hilgers will be the main speaker.

The event has been approved for continuing medical education credits by the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland and every obstetrician and GP in the country is welcome to attend. A birthday party will be held the following day for 500 Irish NaPro children and their parents.

A GP with a special interest in infertility and women's health, Dr Boyle presently runs a busy practice in Galway where over 3,000 couples have received infertility treatment since 1998.

He explains that most of the couples who have come to him for treatment have an average of two babies in separate births. The rate of twins is only about 4 per cent of total births, which is very low compared to IVF treatment and means fewer complications and health problems, he points out.

“About 135 of the couples I have treated had failed IVFs, but went on to have successful pregnancies with Napro. One couple had a successful pregnancy after eight IVF treatments, another after seven and each couple went on to have a second baby. It appears that once we fix the underlying problem, they can go again and again.”

Although the average age of Dr Boyle's patients is 36, he currently has a 48-year-old patient who is expecting — she is the exception rather than the norm, he stresses. It can be difficult to tell which patients the treatment is going to work for, according to Dr Boyle, and it does not work for everybody.

The Fertility Care website (www.fertilitycare.ie) states that although there is a reasonable chance of having a successful live birth with NaProTechnology, it is important to emphasise that about 50 per cent or so of couples may not succeed in achieving that goal.

“While we dearly wish that everybody would conceive, unfortunately a significant number will not. This is not to be pessimistic but realistic and honest. Older couples, where the female age is greater than 40 years and those with severe pelvic adhesions or severe endometriosis have a reduced likelihood of success,” it explains.

Dr Boyle is inviting critics of the treatment to go along to the conference in Galway and to listen to the scientific basis for it. He says much of the criticism of NaPro is due to the fact that there is an information deficit surrounding the treatment.

“What we do is based on scientific published medical studies, but a study incorporating NaProTechnology has not been published yet. A lot of the time, when people hear the science behind it, it makes sense to them. I have made presentations to my peers in the Galway Clinic from various different specialties and they were quite excited about it.”

There are now 50 trained NaPro teachers around the country who Dr Boyle describes as an essential component to the treatment and training programmes are being run every year.

“The treatment has evolved so much even over the 10 years since I started. What we are doing today is far superior to what we were doing only five years ago.

“We are now looking into diet and immune-modifying treatments as well as hormones and it makes quite a difference,” he remarks.