

The IVF worked and now you have the family you always dreamed of. But what happens to the leftover embryos? By Nicole Madigan-Everest

AN *inconceivable* DILEMMA

Ever since I was a little girl, I knew exactly what I wanted to be when I grew up. Actually, there were many things I wanted to be, often conflicting and regularly changing. But one particular ambition always stood out.

More than my aspirations of love and romance, education and career, there remained one constant: I wanted to be a mother. Or rather, I was going to be one. Having children was something I simply expected.

About a year after marrying my university sweetheart and eight years after we met, we decided we'd let go of our zealous dedication to contraception and aim for parenthood.

The entire scenario flashed before my eyes. From conception to the big day, I had it all planned out. I was just 25, with a successful career, and no one would be expecting the news. Spontaneous lovemaking would lead to the surprise discovery, and following official confirmation, we'd announce our baby joy to our unsuspecting family.

It didn't quite play out that way. Each month, our anticipation turned to anxiety and eventually, despair as my husband and I grappled with the fact there were fertility issues at play. Eventually we were told we'd need to undergo IVF (in-vitro fertilisation) to conceive a child. Our heads spun and our hearts broke, but we agreed to the procedure.

IVF is an extraordinarily difficult experience, one that places both physical and mental demands upon you at the same time you're hanging on to hope. You become bloated, tired, sore and emotional. There are ups and then there are downs. When I braved the odd night out for dinner, I kept an injection kit



Two cute: IVF baby Beau (right) and brother, Bailey.

tucked away in a cooler bag so my husband and I could dash out to the car for our version of a baby-making "quickie".

We fertilised my eggs, and the procedure resulted in four healthy blastocysts, or five-day-old embryos. I was just 27, which meant the likelihood of pregnancy was high, so only one was transferred. Nine months later, my son Beau was born.

It wasn't until Beau was a few months old that I began to think about the remaining three embryos I'd fertilised. They'd been placed in a cryopreservation freezer, where they would remain until we were ready to conceive again, and I'd begun referring to them as my "ice babies". It made me acutely aware that Beau was meant to be – he'd been born because the embryologist selected *his* particular embryo. A different choice, a different baby. It was that thought that triggered a creeping →

onset of guilt. Those embryos in the freezer were potentially my future children, and I suddenly longed to meet them.

Then, ten months after Beau's birth, I unexpectedly – and against all odds – fell pregnant naturally. As I saw the double blue lines appear, my heart surged with joy right before it sank in despair. My embryos had missed a chance.

I now have two sons. (Bailey is 18 months old.) I adore them, they're amazing, motherhood is more than I imagined... you know the feeling. But I also have three embryos whose storage charges – or babysitting fees, as I call them – arrive every six months. As I see it, they're waiting for a chance at life. More than anything, I want to give it to them.

Nature, of course, guarantees nothing. If they were transferred, perhaps the three embryos would become three human beings. Maybe they'd yield just one. Reality says they may never produce another child at all.

I didn't think about this much when my husband and I were trying to conceive; most couples don't. Sure, things are explained, but when so much of your life is focused on falling pregnant and coping with the slap of infertility, it all feels like one big what-if that can be dealt with later.

And if you don't eventually have them transferred with the aim of pregnancy, there are three options: you can discard them or donate them – either to research or to another couple.

For Pamela Rose-Holt, there was only ever one option. "It's a strange feeling. I would sometimes be driving in the area where the embryos were stored and think about them. I knew we would go back for them." But the decision didn't come lightly. Pamela acknowledges that in choosing to try and harvest all her embryos, she was potentially opting for a future as the mother of a large family. But, she reasons, "I could never terminate a pregnancy and not giving [them] a chance would've felt like a similar decision."

After the birth of her third child, Jodie Shannan considered her family complete and knew she'd have to make a decision about her other five embryos. She and her husband arranged for them to be donated, only to find that "in NSW, we'd only be able to donate them to science. We wanted to donate them to another couple. After much research I found we could have [them] transferred to Victoria."

She and her husband flew to Melbourne for counselling and governmental approval of an embryo transfer; five years after the initial freezing, a local couple gave birth to a baby boy.

Associate professor Peter Illingworth from IVF Australia, however, says it is possible to donate embryos to infertile couples in NSW with donation options varying depending on the clinic you choose. He also adds that state laws vary in relation to the requirements for storage of donated tissues. In NSW, for instance, donated embryos normally have to be used within 10 years.

Donating your remaining embryos to another woman hoping to become a mother is a loving, selfless decision – but it can't be taken lightly, says psychologist Dr Jodie Housman. The emotional consequences can be overwhelming; as such, couples

are screened, and advised on how to disclose information to their children. Jodie has even managed to find some humour in the situation: "Our daughter born via IVF is 11 years old, and she loves to confuse people by telling them she has a twin brother who is five years younger."

Karen Stanford and her husband grappled with a different outcome. Previously married and with four daughters between them, they decided to have a child of their own when they got together. They eventually created nine embryos, two of which were implanted, and one of which was born. The seven remaining embryos became, as Karen says, "mostly forgotten... until each bill came in the mail charging us storage fees. We couldn't keep paying when we had no intention of using them."

Karen wanted to donate the embryos to an infertile couple. Her husband didn't. After extensive counselling, they decided to give them over for scientific research. Ultimately, Karen reasons, "the frozen embryos were a group of cells, and I don't believe they suffered through their use."

This is where things can get thorny, says Dr Housman. Whatever a couple does with their remaining embryos will undoubtedly be shaded by personal convictions. It's a judgment call that ultimately addresses those core values that shape their everyday reality. "There is no right or wrong way to feel about embryos," reminds Housman. "Ask yourself how you see them. Do you already consider the embryo to be a baby? Do you look at it as a potential future life? Or do you see it as a simple cluster of cells?"

I've given these questions more than enough attention – so much, in fact, that having thought them through, I'm frustrated to find that I seem to be asking more. How many of those embryos are destined to become our children? One? None? Perhaps all three of them? How much longer will I be able to keep them in storage when the guilt only continues

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to plague me? Could I ever go through with donating them to another couple?

In theory, it sounds like such an amazing gift to three little sparks of life, each given the chance to develop, as well as that couple whose desires I so keenly understand. But knowing my own babies were out there, somewhere? I just don't know if I could bear it. And I'm not yet ready to consider the other two options.

I feel a connection – even a love of sorts – toward those embryos. They are potentially my babies. Some may think that's sappy, but as I watch my boys grow, knowing the pain that came before and the immense joy that followed their births, the longing (and, yes, that guilt) only seems to grow stronger.

I'm in limbo, much like those embryos. With two boisterous toddlers at home, all I can do is wait. But for how long? It's one more question trailing me as I move forward. **m**