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Their laughter is the best thing

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‘Their laughter is the best thing’

After a missed diagnosis of endometriosis, Tammy and Chris Stewart thankfully sought a second opinion and are now proud parents of these beautiful IVF “twins” – born two years apart

Story TONYA TURNER

It’s not every day you meet a pair of twins born two years apart. Springfield couple Tammy and Chris Stewart’s children, Connor and Thea, were conceived at the same time in a Brisbane IVF clinic in 2020. After Tammy’s eggs had been collected and fertilised at the lab, she returned a few days later for an embryo transfer. Connor called first dibs and the rest of the embryos, including Thea, were taken to the freezer. Two years later, it was Thea’s turn.

“We thank our lucky stars every day that we were able to have our two children. Every once in a while I think about how amazing science is,” Tammy says.

Apart from their bright blue eyes, Tammy doesn’t think her so-called IVF twins look all that alike. And although Thea is only one, her personality is shining through.

“They are completely different. Connor is timid and sensitive while Thea is adventurous and tries everything,” she says.

It’s too early to tell if coming from the same batch of embryos will form a special bond between the siblings. After riding the emotional rollercoaster that is in vitro fertilisation for four years, Tammy can barely believe they have been able to have not just one child but two.

But she knows it’s not a story everyone going through IVF will want to hear.

“When you’re having IVF, hearing someone

else’s positive story doesn’t always make you feel better,” she says.

“But I needed to talk to people to have an outlet and it surprised me how many people had gone through IVF. Just knowing someone else could relate when I was having a down day when it didn’t work made all the difference.”

While IVF success rates aren’t as high as many would hope, they have come a long way since the first IVF “test tube” baby was born in England in 1978. According to the latest Australian and New Zealand Assisted Reproduction Database annual report, released in September, based on all 95 accredited IVF

clinics in the two countries, 37.1 per cent of women had a baby from their first IVF cycle.

Alongside lifestyle factors and sperm quality, maternal age has a big impact on success rates. For women under 30, it’s 50.6 per cent. For women aged 30-34, it’s 48.5 per cent. Women aged 35-39 have a 34.1 per cent chance, while women aged 40-44 have a 12.4 per cent chance and women over 45 a 0.2 per cent chance.

Tammy, now 34, was in the most promising age bracket when she started IVF. Despite this, she knew they may have a long road ahead of them due to their combined fertility issues.

“It was very overwhelming. We were excited and we’d heard a lot of success stories but I didn’t want to get my hopes up. I wanted to be realistic about it and thought it might take a couple of times,” she says.

After five unsuccessful attempts with the same clinic, Tammy and Chris, 38, felt defeated.

“It’s hard to put into words how distressing that time was,” Tammy says.

“By the end of it we were pretty distraught, emotions were running high and we were starting to consider other options.”

“Friends and family members were falling pregnant and we were so happy for them, but we were starting to picture a future without children in our lives. I felt this want and need to become a mum but it felt constantly out of our grasp.”



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When her mother suggested they get a second opinion, Tammy was hesitant.

"We were getting older and spending a lot of money. We'd paid a fortune and weren't getting anywhere. I'd been putting my body through all these hormone injections and it was just a very difficult time where you know the outcome is going to determine ... whether you're going to have children or not," she says.

"I assumed the process was the same everywhere and I'd get the same result."

But after learning that IVF clinics follow different protocols and processes, Tammy decided to take her mum's advice.

She met with fertility specialist Dr David Molloy at Queensland Fertility Group, where she quickly discovered she likely had endometriosis, which was soon confirmed.

"My first doctor missed that. It was a game changer. All of a sudden I had hope again," she says.

Tammy had a laparoscopy to treat the endometriosis and improve her chances of a successful implantation. Based on her previous attempts, however, she wasn't confident they'd even get to this stage.

"My main issue wasn't getting to the stage of transferring the embryo, it was getting the embryos to a viable stage to give them a shot," she says.

A few days later they were told they had not just one but several viable embryos to use.

"I was absolutely shocked and so over the moon. It was just so hard to believe," she says.

It wasn't until she heard Connor's heartbeat for the first time, at around seven weeks, that Tammy began to truly believe she was going to become a mum.

"It was only when we held him in our arms that it felt real," she says.

Happily, their first IVF attempt with Thea was also successful.

"It's hard to articulate how overjoyed we were," Tammy says.

According to Molloy, it is common for endometriosis to go undiagnosed in women with fertility issues. In some cases, it is the only presenting issue. As for Tammy, fixing the endometriosis was key to giving her the best shot at having a baby.

"Endometriosis can have quite a profound effect on fertility ... Patients may also have a better natural conception chance outside of the IVF program (once it's treated)," Molloy says.

The IVF industry has boomed in recent years and Molloy is frank about it being time for a review.

"These days, fertility has been turned on its head because of successful IVF. If patients are

having trouble getting pregnant, investigations have been cut to very simple and non-invasive ones ... I prefer to give patients reasons for their infertility, to maximise their chances by looking at the underlying causes (rather than) just do IVF and see how everyone goes," he says.

It was a case of sixth time lucky for Tammy. She estimates IVF cost them about \$30,000 out-of-pocket and \$50,000 before rebates using both private and public services.

She can't help but wonder if she might have had success sooner had her endometriosis been discovered earlier.

"I was quite angry at the time. I felt like I'd wasted all this time, money and effort. We were too scared to hope in the end and our hope had almost gone," she says.

Instead of looking back, Tammy and Chris are looking towards the future and life with their two little scientific miracles.

They recently moved into a new home with a bigger back yard for Connor and Thea to run around and play.

"Their laughter is just the best thing in the whole entire world," Tammy says. ■



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The Stewart family:
Thea, now 1, and
Connor, 3, and their
parents Chris and
Tammy; and, below,
Dr David Molloy.
Pictures: Liam Kidston,
Russell Shakespeare



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