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**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**  
WSJ.com

HEALTH JOURNAL | DECEMBER 9, 2008, 7:25 P.M. ET

# Ova Time: Women Line Up To Donate Eggs -- for Money

By MELINDA BECK

Here's another sign of the tough economic times: Some clinics are reporting a surge in the number of women applying to donate eggs or serve as surrogate mothers for infertile couples.

The going rate for a surrogate is about \$25,000. Egg donors generally receive \$3,000 to \$8,000. But a few agencies advertise that they'll pay much more for specific characteristics. One ad running in campus newspapers promises \$25,000 for a donor who is "100% Jewish with ... High SAT Scores... Attractive, at Healthy Body Weight and Free of Genetic Diseases."

"Whenever the employment rate is down, we get more calls," says Robin von Halle, president of Alternative Reproductive Resources, an agency in Chicago where inquiries from would-be egg donors are up 30% in recent weeks -- to about 60 calls a day. "We're even getting men offering up their wives. It's pretty scary."

James Liu, a reproductive endocrinologist at University Hospitals, Case Medical Center, in Cleveland, says there is no waiting now for egg donors since his roster has swelled from the usual 4 to 17.

Andrew Vorzimer, an attorney who represents prospective parents in Los Angeles, says the usual six-month wait for a surrogate in California has vanished as well. "Many of these women have college loans to pay off or they want to help buy a house or provide for their own kids' education," says Mr. Vorzimer, who is also CEO of Egg Donation Inc., a recruiting agency in Encino. "But they are also looking to do something good for other families. And some of them say they love being pregnant."

Donating eggs, or carrying a baby for nine months, is by no means easy -- it's arduous enough that most agencies turn down women who are mainly in it for the money.

Most accept only a tiny fraction of applicants. Candidates generally must be

between 20 and 30 years old, of appropriate weight for their height and in very good health. A history of sexually-transmitted diseases, hepatitis, diabetes, cancer -- even depression -- are all disqualifiers. Candidates must undergo a battery of genetic and psychological tests, and meet a long list of Food and Drug Administration requirements for tissue donors. Among them: no tattoos or body piercings or past residence in various foreign countries, including the U.K. between 1980 and 1996 (to guard against possible exposure to Mad Cow disease).

And that's just to be listed on a registry. Would-be donors then wait to be selected by a recipient couple, which can take months or years. "Now that we have more donors, it's become a buyer's market," Ms. von Halle says. "Some people are looking for a 6-foot Swedish volleyball player with 39 ACTs, and they'll take their time."

Once selected, an egg donor undergoes several weeks of daily hormone injections to synchronize her menstrual cycle with the recipient's, stimulate her ovarian follicles and then ripen the eggs. Donors are monitored every few days with blood tests and ultrasound scans. The eggs are harvested using a needle through the vaginal wall, with the donor under general anesthesia.

Many applicants turn back once they learn what's involved. "The other thing is the lifestyle changes required: no drinking, no smoking, NO SEX ... that's the one that gets them the most," emails Darlene Pinkerton, executive director of A Perfect Match in San Diego, which offers up to \$50,000 for egg donors with high SATs. She says she's seen a doubling of inquiries recently. The American Society for Reproductive Medicine considers compensation above \$10,000 to be inappropriate; Ms. Pinkerton argues that the offer brings in donors who might not otherwise be interested.

There are some risks to the donor -- including possible bleeding and infection at the injection sites, and, in rare cases, ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, in which several dozen eggs ripen at once and the ovaries become dangerously swollen. But careful monitoring can avoid that. "If egg donation is done in an experienced clinic, that complication rate is very, very low and the success rates are quite high," says Zev Rosenwaks, director of reproductive medicine at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center, which performs about 200 egg transfers per year, more than half of which result in live births.

Sperm donation generally pays \$100 or less, and also requires the donor to pass a battery of medical tests. The market for sperm has changed dramatically thanks to a procedure called ICSI, for intracytoplasmic sperm injection. Even when men have very low sperm counts or low motility, doctors can retrieve a single sperm from inside the testes and inject it directly into an egg. "ICSI has revolutionized the treatment of male infertility," says Dr. Rosenwaks. There is still a large market for sperm among single women and lesbian couples who

want to conceive.

And clinics say they've seen no drop in demand for donor eggs, despite the economic downturn and costs that run about \$20,000 per attempt. (Insurance covers the medical procedures in some states, but not the donor fees.) "The disease of infertility does not follow the Dow Jones average," says Sean Tipton, a spokesman for the ASRM.

Many of the couples seeking egg donors and surrogates are from Europe, where paying for such services is illegal and waits can stretch for many years.

"Annie," a 29-year-old lawyer has donated twice through Mr. Vorzimer's service but doesn't want her family to know. She says she didn't need the money: "I thought it was a great thing to do to help people." The first time was for an Australian couple, but the baby died in utero. "I was heartbroken," she says. "I was going to get to meet the baby and see what my kids would look like." The second couple wanted an anonymous arrangement, so she doesn't know if a baby is on the way.

Despite feeling bloated and missing a few days work, Annie says she'll probably donate once more. But she says being an egg donor "is something to seriously think about, and not just go into for the money. You have to ask yourself, once this process is over and there's this baby out there, how are you going to feel? Think about it -- a lot."

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