

OUR GAMBLE We turned our backs on NHS and jetted abroad for IVF – trip & baby can be magic formula but there's heartbreak involved.

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INVESTIGATION



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NERVES filled Laura Jarvis's stomach as she clicked to confirm her booking for a ten-night trip to Cyprus.

But this wasn't any ordinary break for 47-year-old Laura, or partner Jamie, 41.

After three failed rounds of IVF in the UK, they had decided to fly to a fertility clinic 2,000 miles away in a last attempt to become parents.

Three years and £6,500 later, Laura has no regrets.

She is now mum to son Flynn, two, and says:

“It was my dream to be a mum and for many years I didn't think it would come true, which was devastating.”

“Even now, I sometimes can't believe Flynn is actually here and that I have everything I've always wanted.”

Laura is one of hundreds of thousands of women who have travelled far afield for IVF, to destinations including Spain, Turkey and the Czech Republic.

Spain accounts for almost 40 percent of fertility tourism in Europe, with women and couples lured by cheaper costs. And with a 30 per cent rise in global fertility tourism predicted over the next seven or eight years, demand shows no sign of dwindling.

It was the lower cost, as well as anonymous egg donation, which first attracted Laura, a personal banker, to The EuroCARE clinic in Nicosia, northern Cyprus.

She turned to it after IVF in Glasgow, an hour away from her home in Ayrshire, had failed.

HAVING CHILDREN WAS SOMETHING SHE HAD ALWAYS WANTED.

But she says: “I assumed it would happen naturally, as I was 32 and healthy.

“Yet month after month, my period arrived and I started to worry. I bought ovulation kits so sex was timed around when I was most fertile but I still wasn't pregnant.”

A year on, the couple were referred for tests and, when doctors could find no reason for Laura being unable to conceive, they began IVF.

IVF PROVISION IN THE UK IS PATCHY

Laura says: “We were eligible for three on the NHS and the first failed.

“We tried again four months later and I got pregnant but a month after that, I miscarried. It was devastating.”

In May 2010, Laura, then 35, had her third and final “free” round but it failed again, halting their parenting plans.

Laura says: “We couldn't afford to pay for IVF privately, and we couldn't face going through any more heartache, so we stopped trying.”

Access to IVF in the UK can be problematic because of patchy NHS provision.

Postcode lotteries, age and BMI stipulations, as well as high treatment costs at private clinics, whose prices are not currently regulated, can all be stumbling blocks.

Guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence advise that women under 40 who have not conceived after two years of regular unprotected sex should be offered three full cycles of IVF through the NHS.

But individual Integrated Care Boards across the country decide how many IVF rounds can be offered in each town and this can vary. While some areas offer between one and three cycles, others offer none at all.

In 2016, Scotland increased the limit from two cycles to three, the same year Laura decided to try again, but it still meant she would have to pay for her treatment privately.

Laura was told she would have a greater chance of pregnancy if she used an egg donor.

But because children born in the UK through egg donation are able to find their biological mothers when they reach 18, Laura was reluctant. She explains: “I wanted my egg donor to remain anonymous, so I did research and found a UK-based company who had a clinic in Cyprus.

“They didn't question my age and although I had a BMI of around 30 which had been questioned before during my treatment in the UK I was eligible.

“We paid £6,500 for the flights, accommodation and treatment. I took medication to make sure my womb lining would be thick enough for the implantation. It was prescribed by the clinic overseas and given to me via my GP in the UK before we travelled.

“Everything went to plan and the donor eggs were injected with Jamie's sperm. Five days later, we went back to the clinic and were told we had six blastocysts, the name given to early stages of an embryo, and three were inserted in my womb using a catheter.”

Back home, Laura discovered she was pregnant and she and Jamie, a car service adviser, welcomed baby Flynn in November 2020.

He was born at Ayrshire Maternity Unit weighing 10lb, and Laura says:

“HAVING IVF IN CYPRUS WAS AMAZING. I WENT ON HOLIDAY AND CAME BACK WITH A BABY.”

In 2019, 250,000 Brits went abroad for fertility treatment, double the 2018 number, says the Office for National Statistics.

Andrew Coutts, of the International Fertility Company, which helps women considering treatment overseas, says its gets around 150 enquiries a month from people in the UK.

He says: “Most UK clinics will have a relationship with an overseas clinic who will be able to treat their patients.

“This might be to do with donor availability or an overseas clinic's willingness to treat older women or those with a higher BMI.

“They are cheaper as a general rule. Cost, access and availability are the three main reasons patients continue to travel abroad.”

But Dr Catherine Hill, at charity Fertility Network UK, urges women and couples to do their homework.

She says: “People need to be very careful. Look at the IVF rules and regulations of the country you are travelling to, especially around donors.

“In the UK, every clinic must measure their success rate in the same way, so it is a like-for-like comparison.

“But that's not always the case with clinics abroad.

“It may be, if a particular clinic has a high success rate, that they have cherry-picked their data or chosen a particularly successful period of time to share.”