

RIGHT TRACK

Hopes pinned on alternate path to fertility



JAMES GOOLSBY/TIMES UNION

AUDREY DOUGLAS, shown with her children, Julia Kuk, 5, and 3-month-old twins Owen Kuk, left, and Ryan Kuk, says acupuncture helped her feel healthier while undergoing fertility treatments.

By STEPHANIE EARLS
Staff writer

After a year of marriage, Audrey Douglas and David Kuk decided to start a family. The Albany couple conceived almost immediately, and Douglas gave birth to a baby girl, Julia, in 2001.

About a year later, Douglas, a school psychologist, and Kuk, a restaurateur, decided they wanted to expand the family again. Douglas got pregnant, but miscarried within the early weeks. A second pregnancy ended similarly. And a third.

“For a while there, it was, like, ‘Don’t worry it will be fine, just give it time,’” said Douglas. But there was no denying it: Things weren’t fine.

Douglas sought a fertility specialist, who diagnosed her

with endometriosis, a condition in which endometrial tissue is found outside the uterus, causing pain and interfering with fertility. Douglas began a six-month course of medication for the endometriosis, then began taking a fertility drug. The drug never worked.

Douglas began considering other options. A work colleague who was also trying to get pregnant mentioned to Douglas that she had begun acupuncture, a traditional Chinese therapy, to augment fertility treatment. “I had no frame of reference for it,” said Douglas, whose forays into alternative therapies previously hadn’t gone much deeper than yoga. “But I have a stressful job and a busy life. I decided I wasn’t going to make myself crazy researching it. I’m just

Audrey Douglas, 36

- **Diagnosis:** Endometriosis, a condition in which endometrial tissue is found outside the uterus, causing pain and interfering with fertility.
- **Success:** After a combination of surgery, fertility treatments and acupuncture, Douglas gave birth to twins.

going to go do it.” In fall 2004, Douglas sought out Rebecca Rice, a licensed acupuncturist who, at the time, had an office near Douglas’ workplace. The weekly, hour-long sessions — which cost \$70, and, like many alternative therapies, were not covered by insurance — became an oasis of time that Douglas looked forward to. Her physical sense

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of herself began to improve. She learned how to relax, deeply.

"It was the best hour of my week," she said.

A subsequent pregnancy, however, also ended in miscarriage, prompting Douglas and her husband to switch doctors. They began seeing Dr. Peter M. Horvath, the founder and medical director of Albany In Vitro Fertilization. Horvath treated Douglas' endometriosis surgically and immediately began her on injections that would increase the number of eggs she would produce each month.

He encouraged her to keep up the acupuncture — though, in a strictly scientific sense, he couldn't say why. Acupuncture, which dates from around the fifth century B.C., involves the insertion of slender pins in the top layers of the skin at key points in the body. For the most part, clinical studies on the treatment have yet to supply the level of validity the Western medical and scientific world requires.

Rice explains that acupuncture works to unlock doors in the "meridians," or the pathways in the body along which chi, or energy, travels. "When we have blockages in the meridians, various things occur," said Rice, who practices at the Center for Integrative Health and Healing in Delmar and at One Roof in Saratoga Springs. "Infertility is one of those things."

Horvath believes acupuncture

can complement fertility treatment — if only because that's what his patients believe.

"I can't scientifically explain how it works. I do feel very much if patients ask me about it, it is a modality that I am supportive of," said Horvath. "I am for it, I do promote it and talk about it with patients. I don't hold it out to them as a panacea. I hold it out as ... an adjunctive therapy that may improve things in subtle ways that Western medicine isn't equipped to really elucidate."

Trying, and failing, to conceive can send stress skyrocketing, which can create a host of physiological effects that ultimately work against fertility, Horvath said.

"We run these crazy lives where we're running around and you don't even have time to focus, to say: 'Oh gee, let me think about my uterus and my endometrium,'" he said. Acupuncture can provide that time. What it comes down to, Horvath said, is: What's the harm?

"With acupuncture, what's the down side? There's the time and cost, but other than that there is no down side," he said.

One round of intrauterine insemination later, and Douglas found herself pregnant — with twins. She credits Horvath — and Rice.

"All I know is that my body felt so much healthier," said Douglas, who carried the pregnancy to term and gave birth in April to twin boys, Owen and

Ryan. (Incidentally: The co-worker who turned Douglas on to acupuncture gave birth to triplets). "All of my systems seemed to be working better. Acupuncture at the very least helps you to relax, and that was something I needed."

Understanding how acupuncture works, in relation to infertility, means understanding a "completely different paradigm to Western medicine," said Rice, who said that infertility treatment represents the bulk of her practice.

"I think it's great that more and more doctors are supporting Chinese medicine for fertility," she said. "Chinese medicine has been addressing this issue for thousands of years. In terms of going to the next level in health care, it's going to be really important to include Eastern and Western ideas, because that way we are getting the fullest scope of healthcare we can get, and that's what's best for the patient."

Douglas continued acupuncture into her first trimester of pregnancy, when she decided that the financial commitment was too much for a family with twins on the way. Today, money and lack of free time keep the mom of three from Rice's office. "I wish I could be doing it right now," she said. "Definitely."