

Is IVF the answer to Singapore's low birth-rate?

By Sharvin S/O Rajandran



A young mother caring for her toddler in a crowded MRT train

SINGAPORE- The total fertility rate in Singapore is at an all-time low in two decades as couples increasingly face a myriad of issues when trying to conceive naturally. This worrying trend has led many couples to turn to Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) to aid in their childbearing efforts despite its high costs and uncertain success rates in older women.

Dr Mohit Sharma, a former Reproductive Endocrinology fellow at the National University Health System (NUHS), explained that "over three-fifths of Singapore's are under the misconception that infertility is completely curable with medical assistance." This is, however, not true for a majority of couples who turn to In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) "as success rates from the treatment vary depending on a number of factors like frequency, age, lifestyle and specific fertility problems."

Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) released its Annual Birth & Death Statistics 2018 report which points out that "Singaporean women are delaying the birth of children till a later age." when they feel they are better equipped to raise a child. However, difficulties in childbearing increases exponentially every year as couples delay plans for conceiving since ageing is a key factor affecting fertility.

Dr Sharma also pointed out, "ART treatments tend to be expensive as there is often a need for women to go through multiple IVF cycles to be successful," which can cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$300,000 before government subsidies in public hospitals and \$24,000 to upwards of \$400,000 in private clinics and hospitals. Highlighting that "whilst IVF treatment improves

the probability of conception, the rate of success is still somewhere around 20 to 40 per cent in women older than 35 years old."

Despite being a nation with some of the best medical services in the world, Singapore has the third-lowest fertility rate in the world and this unfortunate trend will not improve unless the fundamental issue of delaying plans for child conception is reconsidered.

While medicine can help in situations like these, it is still far from a certainty, and there is still a high possibility that throwing money at the problem might not be the most effective solution when moving ahead unless all the other avenues have been exhausted.