

Moms in their 60s -- oh, baby!

Thanks to advances in reproductive technologies, senior citizen mothers are raising troubling questions.

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On July 11, Maria del Camen Bousada de Lara, a Spanish woman who 2 1/2 years ago briefly became the "world's oldest mom" when she gave birth to twin boys at age 67, died of cancer. A recipient of donor eggs and sperm at a Los Angeles fertility clinic, she had told doctors she was 55, the maximum age for partnerless in-vitro fertilization patients at that clinic. It's unclear who will care for Bousada's children, though she was quoted before her death as saying that friends and family members (some of whom had expressed public dismay over her pregnancy) were available to step in. Bousada's cancer was diagnosed shortly after her sons were born in December 2006.

Now that the practice of scolding women over their reproductive choices has become something of a sport, this story, sad as it is, seems headed for the finger-wagging hall of fame. Granted, Nadya Suleman, a.k.a. Octomom, remains the poster child of assisted reproductive technology run amok. But anyone inclined to grumble about women delaying their childbearing years beyond what is "natural" now need only point to Bousada.

Her story, after all, has all the elements: a single woman desperate enough not only to lie but to sell her house to foot the \$52,000 medical bill; a fertility clinic (here in California, naturally) that believed her lie and took her money; and, finally, a tragic ending (and there have been some reports that Bousada's cancer was hastened by the fertility treatments) that has left two children parentless.

But Bousada is not the only senior citizen ever admitted to a maternity ward. Since 1994, there have been 12 documented cases of women over 60 having babies (including a 62-year-old California woman who already had 11 other children). The reigning "world's oldest mom" is likely Omkari Panwar, an Indian woman who was believed to be 70 (her exact age was unknown) when she gave birth to boy-and-girl twins last summer. Never mind that she already had two grown daughters and five grandchildren. Her 77-year-old husband spent his life savings and sold his buffaloes to pay for in-vitro fertilization -- and donor eggs -- because they wanted a son.

"I can die a happy man and a proud father," he told reporters.

Frightened for the future of humanity? Me too.

Stories like these tend to have that effect. They can also give the impression that assisted reproductive technologies, particularly egg donation, belong to the realm of some

surreal new world where septuagenarians registered at Baby Gap will represent just another "alternative lifestyle" that traditional folk will have to "tolerate."

But many statistics put the average age of an egg-donor recipient at 42 -- a long way from 66. And according to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, nearly 33,000 children have been born to women using donated eggs between 2004 and 2007. So why do we focus on the anomalous cases like Bousada's and Panwar's and decry the whole phenomenon -- which, on balance, truly seems to have improved many people's lives?

Rachel Lehmann-Haupt, author of "In Her Own Sweet Time," an account of the current state of reproductive technology and her own quest to outsmart her biological clock, thinks part of what's happening is that the mainstream segment of this movement is largely invisible.

"Women in their 40s often don't disclose that they're using donor eggs," said Lehmann-Haupt. "So you have a lot of older women -- a lot of celebrities, for instance -- who are asking us to believe they got pregnant on their own."

Not only does that result in people thinking it's possible, even easy, to get pregnant on your own well into middle age, it can unfairly turn "Guinness Book" moms into the face of fertility assistance.

Is the solution to impose strict age limits? That makes me uncomfortable for a wide range of "get your laws off my body" reasons. So I suppose my -- and I'd guess most people's -- greatest wish is that human beings were better able to impose their own limits, age-wise and otherwise.

We don't know exactly what drove Bousada's decision. No doubt her reasons can't exactly be boiled down to a series of generalizations about the fear of growing old or the culture of entitlement or plain old shortsightedness (as easy as such armchair psychologizing seems). But I can't help but think -- make that hope -- that the publicity that surrounds those who run wild with reproductive technology is its own best cautionary tale. Having a kid later in life is great if that's your thing. But, come on -- no one with a kid in Pampers should be in Depends.