

Quote of the day

"A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on" – Carl Sandburg

Lily Liu has used Traditional Chinese Medicine to help thousands of women conceive.

Seeking fertility

Worn out by Western fertility treatments, more women are turning to Traditional Chinese Medicine to help their chances at becoming pregnant. Holly Davis reports.

TWELVE YEARS AFTER my daughter's birth I continue to marvel at our ability to conceive, nurture and deliver new life. It is undeniable – the sight of your newborn baby is an unforgettable and unfathomable thing.

I was 35 when I had my daughter, and one of the increasing number of Australians waiting longer to start a family. According to the National Perinatal Statistics Unit at the University of New South Wales (www.npsu.unsw.edu.au/Stats.htm), the average age of all mothers in 1993 was 28.2 years and first-time mothers 26.2 years. By 2003 the average age rose to 29.5 years and 27.6 years respectively. The reproductive age of women is considered to be between 15 and 44 years, but beyond 35 there is an increasing, though not inevitable, chance of incurring some difficulty associated with conception, viability and carrying a baby to full term. When required there are now many interventions that can assist us. Traditional Chinese Medicine is a less invasive option.

Eastern wisdom

Traditional Chinese Medicine practices – the use and application of Chinese herbs and acupuncture – are described in classical Chinese texts that date back to 200BC. Chinese medicine looks for and treats the causes of disease rather than symptoms alone; clients are viewed as whole body systems.

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine there are five organ systems within the body, and energy known as 'qi' (chi) that should flow unimpeded along invisible lines called 'meridians' in balance. When life exerts itself, as it will, this balance may be upset, resulting in emotional and/or physical disease. There are a number of therapeutic modalities that a Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner may choose to employ. These include: acupuncture, acupressure, moxibustion (a stick of smouldering mugwort herb is used to heat specific points along a meridian above the skin, to stimulate or sedate qi), herbal medicine, dietary advice, Chinese massage, and practices such as Tai Chi or Qi Gong (forms of movement meditation).

Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners assess your condition and state of balance using a series of diagnostics. There is usually an in-depth discussion that covers a wide area of one's life, not focusing specifically on the symptoms of concern. Among other things, they will listen for the qualities in your voice to determine the state of your spirit or 'shen'. A medical history is taken and a physical examination that includes looking at your skin, tongue, hair, the colour of your fingernails and even, discreetly the way you smell. Your pulses will be taken (there are six pulses on each wrist). When he or she determines where the imbalance lies they will then treat you using the appropriate therapy or combination of therapies.

Searching for help

Since the decision to start a family later in life raises the chance of complications, it also raises the level of concern we may have about whether we have left it too late, and whether we can trust our own or even our partner's body. If we do conceive there comes a myriad of concerns about the wellbeing of the baby we may be carrying and the birth to come. Couples who struggle to conceive are prepared to and do put themselves through a great deal of discomfort, angst and disappointment. This painful experience can erode even the greatest self-esteem and challenges the most stable relationships. Repeated attempts

to conceive that end in no pregnancy, miscarriage or forced terminations can cost those involved a great deal more than the financial expense.

Chinese medicine may provide the answers for some couples that have not had success through other means. In Sydney we are blessed to have several Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners who have made fertility their specialty. I spoke to Lily Liu, who has spent 18 years building her practice, and it is clear that fertility is indeed her passion.

"Both of my parents were Western medical doctors in China. My mother was a talented obstetrician and clinical pathologist. Her work always fascinated me – I wanted to be a gynaecologist," explains Lily. "I was quite young when my mother became very ill. Fifteen years of treatment with Western medicine did not help her, and this inspired me to study Traditional Chinese Medicine – to seek answers for her. Her courage and belief in me encouraged me to give her treatments. She was my first patient in six years of Chinese medicine study. Her recovery was miraculous, and I continued my Chinese medicine studies in gynaecology and immune systems, determined to help more women."

The practitioner looks to treat root causes rather than the symptoms of disease alone. Herbs and acupuncture are used to stimulate the body's natural healing potential. Traditional Chinese Medicine views us as physical and spiritual beings, and looks to integrate mind, body and spirit.

Since moving to Sydney in 1988, Lily has treated thousands of patients to recover their health. Most of her patients have given birth to healthy babies when it appeared unlikely that they ever would. Lily believes that determination, an open mind and patience are prerequisites for using Chinese medicine. "I feel enormous compassion for the women who seek my help; most of them come to me for fertility issues, are over 40 years old, and have been trying to conceive for a few years or have had recurrent miscarriages. Many of them have suffered through many invasive procedures and arrive in a state of depletion and desperation," says Lily.

A standard session with Lily will involve her reviewing a woman's medical history then examining her pulse, tongue and body condition. For each individual case, she determines a treatment plan and conducts ongoing hormone tests. Treatment will involve acupuncture, Chinese herbs and dietary advice. Lily also works with a range of GPs and gynaecologists, and treats women who are undergoing IVF treatment.

"I address the patient's menstrual issues, ovulation and implantation, and also their emotional condition," she says. Once a patient becomes pregnant, Lily will continue anti-miscarriage treatments for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and resume treatment at about 36 weeks, to prepare her for the birth and post-partum period.

"Most women who come to me have had several attempts at IVF. They come feeling hopeless – my heart goes out to them," says Lily. "My aim is to encourage them emotionally and give them the best Traditional Chinese Medicine fertility treatment."

Treating dysmenorrhoea

The University of Western Sydney Centre for Complementary Medicine Research is conducting a Chinese herbal trial for period pain, also known as dysmenorrhoea. Period pain affects as many as fifty per cent of menstruating women, and can be severely painful in some cases. The trial, which has been going since May 2005, is testing a secret herbal remedy taken in powder. These herbs have been used in China for centuries to treat the causes of dysmenorrhoea, rather than just its symptoms.

The study is being held at clinics throughout Sydney, and needs women aged 18-45 years to take part. For more information, call Xiaoshu Zhu on (02) 9772 6528 or 0404 880 996, or email x.zhu@uws.edu.au.



Chinese herbs are prescribed to restore health and improve chances of conception.

Tiana and Andrew

It was not the inability to conceive that had Tiana and Andrew Saunders seek Lily's services – it was repeated miscarriages. Tiana's first miscarriage occurred just after their wedding and she had a second shortly after that. Tiana now has three exceptionally beautiful children: Saskia, eight, Christian, seven, and 11-month-old Xavier, who bares an uncanny resemblance to Buddha – a robust and jolly baby, the embodiment of health if ever I saw it.

A friend suggested the couple see Lily Liu. At the time Tiana was 29 and feeling mortified by the belief that she would never have children; she was physically and emotionally exhausted. Lily reassured them she was certain that with Traditional Chinese Medicine and time she could assist them in creating a healthy family. Her first recommendation was that they stop trying to become pregnant. Lily told them she would work on restoring Tiana's health with a focus on strengthening her uterus and recovering her vitality. Andrew also took courses of herbs to ensure the production of the healthiest sperm.

Tiana was delighted by Lily's determination that she not simply get pregnant but that they all work together to ensure the highest quality egg and sperm were produced. Tiana found Lily's reassurance extremely welcome. She enjoyed the acupuncture and found it was very relaxing. Making up the herbal brews that she drank twice a day was not difficult and "quite enjoyable", though she could not say the same for the taste, which varied according to what herbs were in the mix. It did not take very long before she noticed a shift in her energy, her menstrual cycle became regular and less painful, and she slept more easily and more deeply. She began to feel fit and energised. She had always eaten well but on Lily's recommendation she started to eat more meat. Lily adjusted and altered the herbs on a weekly basis after consultations. Tiana sees Lily as far more than a 'doctor'; she was warm and

"My overall health improved, both physically and mentally," says Tiana. "I really appreciated that we were working together to get the healthiest baby possible."

caring and interested in everything that Tiana discussed with her. Tiana felt that she had an ally and a confidant who was sharing the journey with her. "My overall health improved, both physically and mentally," says Tiana. "I really appreciated that we were working together to get the healthiest baby possible."

After the first year of consultations with Lily, Tiana became pregnant. For the first 12 weeks of the pregnancy Tiana was given herbs to strengthen her uterus. The pregnancy resulted in Saskia's birth. Seven months later Tiana returned to Lily feeling off-colour; she had not had a period since Saskia's birth and went seeking herbs to restore her energy. Lily took her pulse and announced that she was pregnant and that it was a male pulse! Christian was the result of that pregnancy. He was followed by an unexpected pregnancy, but due to chromosomal problems this pregnancy did not reach full term. Tiana returned to Lily for a course of herbs and three months later became pregnant again; 11 months ago Xavier joined the family.

Tiana's stepsister Rachel Howard lives in Britain and had

been trying to conceive for five years; she came to Australia for a holiday and Tiana immediately took her to Lily's clinic. Rachel took herbs for six months, which Tiana sent to her in Britain. She returned blood tests to Lily who adjusted the herbs accordingly. She conceived and carried a healthy baby to term and is currently trying for a second child with Lily's assistance.

By the will of Grace

Grace was very keen to become a mum. She was 42 and single, and her desire for a family was compelling. She went in search of information and support; she saw her doctor, an obstetrician and also visited a number of fertility clinics regarding how she might go about becoming pregnant. Grace feels that her enquiries were met with conservative indifference and negativity – she felt little support from medical specialists – but she was determined.

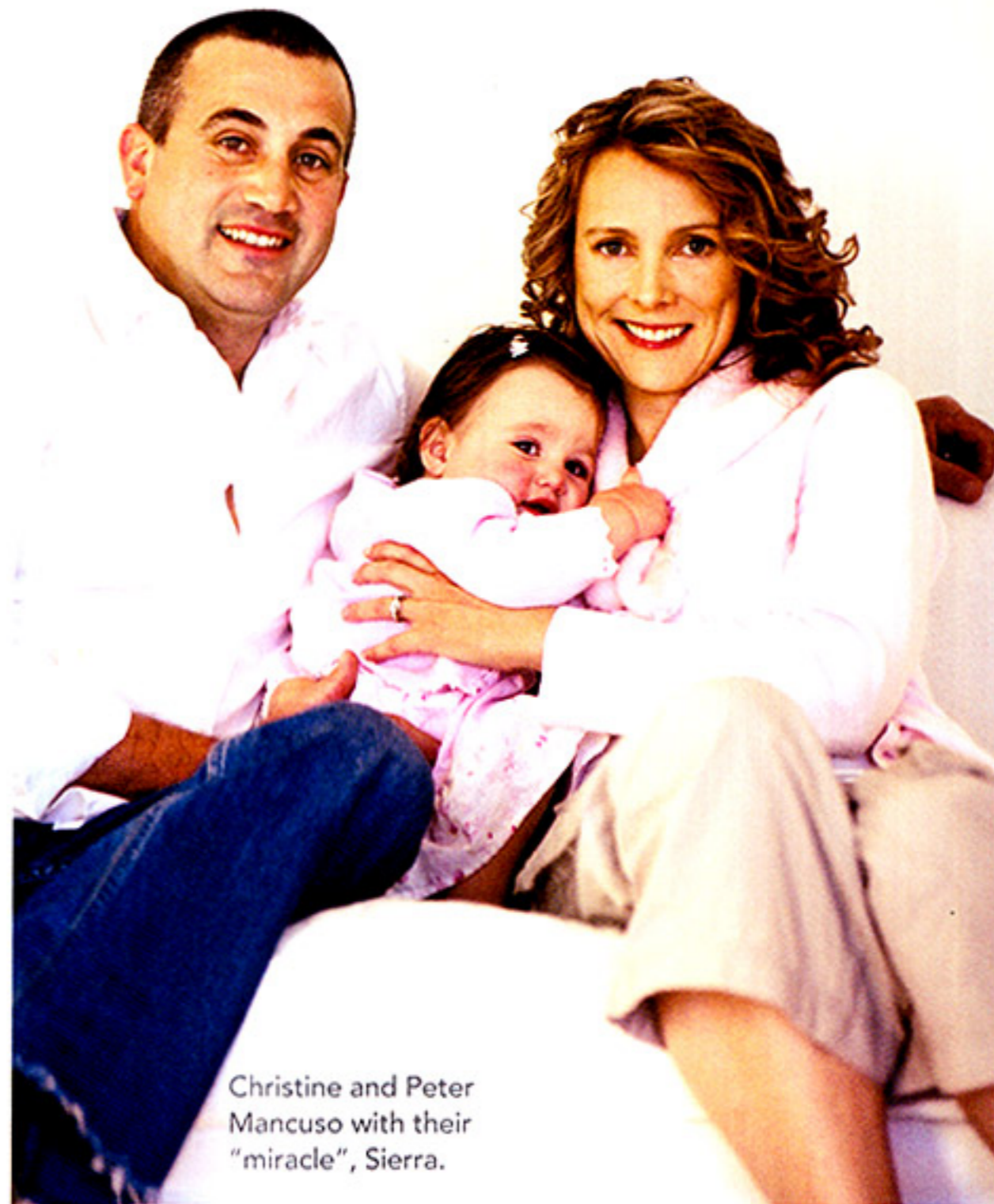
Grace was told that her hormone levels meant she was infertile and that courses of fertility drugs would make no difference. She was given less than a one per cent chance of becoming pregnant. Her gynaecologist suggested she try Traditional Chinese Medicine as her last hope. Grace felt depressed, despondent and dejected. She arrived at Lily's clinic 45 years old and in a state of hopeless misery. After a few months of treatment there was a very marked alteration. Grace says that she and her friends could not believe the difference the herbs and acupuncture made. She felt so much more relaxed physically and emotionally, she felt invigorated, youthful and radiant, she could climb the hill to her home with greater speed and ease, she had abundant energy and her hormone levels rose beyond all expectations.

Grace found Lily's faith very affirming and with renewed hope in her own body she finally conceived. As she told me this she looked like the majority of new mothers – soft and tired from lack of sleep but filled with joy. Her eyes and hair shone and I was moved to see her feeding her then nine-week-old son Aaron. Grace expressed how priceless Aaron is to her and her immense gratitude for Lily's support. "It wasn't cheap, but the end result is priceless! After taking the herbs for a few months I felt more youthful, energetic and enthusiastic about my future."

A miracle child

Christine and Peter Mancuso went through a long and painful journey before desperation led them to Lily's door.

Following a miscarriage and an ectopic pregnancy, the couple was referred to the IVF program. Normally, a fallopian tube affected by an ectopic pregnancy would be removed in preparation for IVF. However, Christine's other fallopian was discovered to have adhesions and scar tissue as a result of appendicitis, which she had at age 15. It was suggested both tubes be removed, but her obstetrician decided against this, in the end removing only the tube affected by adhesions. Christine then underwent five cycles of IVF and incurred two more miscarriages. The couple decided they had had too many hormones; it was too invasive and just so disappointing. Christine was 37, sick, run down and not coping well at work. They both took a much-needed break. Their strong relationship was suffering. Christine's obstetrician thought they had a very low chance of becoming pregnant naturally and they should consider IVF again. While looking for a new IVF clinic, a friend



Christine and Peter Mancuso with their "miracle", Sierra.

suggested they seek Lily's services.

Christine saw Lily to improve her general health. Lily wanted a couple of months to see if she could fix the fallopian tube and, if not, she said she would work in conjunction with the IVF clinic. Christine found Lily to be positive and confident, and liked that she gave her a time frame to work with. She was put on a seven-week program of herbs and acupuncture to repair and heal her damaged fallopian tube. She felt quite nauseous taking the herbs and even though she didn't enjoy them, stuck with the program. She noticed that her energy returned and her state of mind improved hugely. Then Lily started Christine on her fertility program and within one month she became pregnant. She was thrilled and started Lily's anti-miscarriage program, taking herbs for the first 18 weeks. One-year-old Sierra is her "miracle" baby girl.

"After a couple of years of medical intervention, going to Lily Liu made me feel like I was doing something good for myself," says Christine. "Lily made my dream come true. Sierra is our miracle."

Like the other women I spoke to, Christine felt supported and nurtured through a traumatic time in her life. She went to Lily twice a week and valued the warm and friendly atmosphere of the clinic. "Lily's clinic has an inviting feel, a smell of herbs cooking, hundreds of thankyou pictures and cards on the wall, and other women in the waiting room chatting and telling their stories."

The stories of people who overcome adversity of any kind are inspiring, and this is a very small sample of individuals who have shown, among other things, their courage, strength and tenacity. The progeny of those who will go to such lengths to have children are perhaps the most loved and blessed of all. ■

For more information about Lily Liu, visit www.lilyliu.com.au. To find other qualified practitioners, visit www.acupuncture.org.au.