

Suburban Life

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Single Mothers by Choice

Women opt for non-traditional parenthood without a mate

By Joanne Sobczak
special writer

FIVE YEAR OLD Billy Brandt knows he doesn't have a father. His mother, Helen, told him he didn't have a dad before he could even speak.

Billy has some concept of his birth. Brandt explained to him that she consulted a doctor and "got sperm" and the doctor put the sperm inside her, creating her son.

She's not sure how much of this information Billy comprehends, but for now, "he's comfortable with it."

"We also talked about a man who gave that sperm, but my preference is to just tell him that he doesn't have a dad and there never was or will be a father figure," said the 42-year-old Hutzel Hospital nurse who chose artificial insemination in order to conceive.

BRANDT FINDS solace in Single Mothers by Choice, a local support group for women who have decided to bear or adopt a child without a partner.

Forty metro area women make up the current SMC mailing list. The group was founded in 1986 as an offshoot of the New York organization. SMC was intended as support for unmarried mothers and to "assist thinkers" to explore the possibility of being single parents.

Shortly after the founding, the core membership of 10-12 mothers began bringing their children to meetings. The group later extended itself to the youngsters, offering playtime and common ground.

"IT'S A WOMAN'S choice to become a single parent," said chairwoman Phillis Clements, whose pregnancy and daughter were also the result of artificial insemination.

"We don't feel that it is a choice that's right for every woman, but if she makes that choice, we would like to be there as a support group."

"We are not a group that is so pro

woman that we thought we had to do this without men. That's not the case. For the most part we would have preferred to have done it with an established partner. However, that wasn't the case in most instances.

"Marriage can happen at any time, children can't happen any time."

MOST OF the group's membership is over age 35 (35 to 47 years). They have stable careers and most own homes.

About 50 percent chose artificial insemination to give birth to a "wanted child."

Most of the others discovered they were pregnant by the men in their lives and decided to continue the pregnancy without the relationship and become single parents. A small percentage selected "willing partners" or went the adoption route.

"The majority of us are well established and are able to support a child without recourse to public funds," SMC co-chair Sharon Grieser said as she watched her daughter, Abby, play with Clements' daughter, Megan.

GRIESER, A 40-year-old Royal Oak postal clerk, conceived during a relationship with a man who she later determined would not make a compatible lifetime mate.

"We are not having kids for the sake of having kids and being on welfare," Clements said, nodding in agreement.

"We are having kids for the sake of being a responsible parent. The majority of women in the group took a long time to make the decision and felt they could provide a stable home for a child."

"And a stable loving home with one parent was better than an unstable home with two parents."

BRANDT ELECTED artificial in-

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Helen Brandt, with her son Billy, talks about her membership in the support group Single Mothers by Choice which meets

once a month, alternating sites in Farmington Hills and Rochester.

JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

Aches and pains

Victims cope with nightmare after taking L- tryptohpan supplement

By Janice Brunson
special writer

When John Wright speaks of the condition that afflicts him, he stresses the word pain.

"The worst is the muscle pain; it's so distracting, a burning pain that's persistent," said Wright, who directs public programs at the Henry Ford Museum. "It's hard to think of anything else."

Wright suffers from Eosinophilic Myalgia Syndrome (EMS), a rare

and debilitating disorder that has no known cure and is caused by the use of a Japanese-manufactured food supplement popular in the 1980s, called L-tryptophan.

Sold widely in health food and drug stores, the supplement was recalled by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration a year ago after thousands fell ill with mysterious symptoms, including severe muscle and joint pain, pulmonary and respiratory problems, paralysis, organ deterioration, skin and eye diseases and

even brain dysfunction.

L-tryptophan is an amino acid used as a dietary supplement. Called nature's sleeping pill, some 14 million Americans took it to gain an interrupted night's sleep. It was also used to suppress symptoms of premenstrual syndrome or to enhance the effects of antidepressants.

Based on data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, an estimated 15,000 Americans may suffer from EMS, many still in silence and unaware of the possible

physical devastation facing them.

WRIGHT IS all too aware. After taking L-tryptophan for six months, he fell ill in July 1990. He has been plagued with terrible muscular pain and other symptoms since, unable to work full-time except for brief periods.

"Fortunately, my employer is very understanding but I don't know how much longer that can last," he said. "I just take one day at a time."

Perhaps worst of all is facing the

future. Because EMS is a new medical disorder that defies treatment, Wright does not know if he will improve, stabilize or get worse.

Connie Nofz, 34, a self-supporting dental hygienist with EMS, also dreads the future. A resident of Farmington Hills, she fears the day she will no longer be able to work. Nofz is certain that day looms in the immediate future.

After a particularly severe bout of flu that developed into encephalitis three years ago, her doctor recommended she take L-tryptophan to treat the effects of mood swing, the result of brain swelling caused by the encephalitis. EMS symptoms appeared almost instantly, growing more severe each month.

Nofz suffers most from pain in her joints, a condition that is striking in its resemblance to advanced rheumatoid arthritis. Her fingers are affected, limiting dexterity necessary to work.

ALTHOUGH painfully impaired, Nofz considers herself luckier than most with EMS. Her symptoms appeared simultaneously with public awareness about the syndrome, thereby saving her from a lengthy and frustrating search for medical answers that others she knows have experienced.

To date, 27 deaths have been attributed to EMS and another 2,000 cases have been medically verified. In Michigan, incidence is high, possibly because sales of L-tryptophan were more widespread here.

For every case diagnosed, Nofz is certain there are many others yet to be diagnosed.

"Our biggest need is letting people know about this," she said. Late last year, she founded a support group that meets monthly. Those who attend share personal symptoms and possible treatment.

Farmington Hills attorney Raymond Cassar attends most meetings because, due to the newness of the condition, "the people who are afflicted with this generally know more than the doctors."

Cassar represents a number of clients now suing Showa Denko, the

Japanese firm that once cornered 80 percent of all L-tryptophan sales. The firm is charged with manufacturing tainted supplies in the late 1980s.

SHOWA DENKO, the third largest chemical manufacturer in the world, is also noted for paying stiff fines in the 1960s for contaminating Japanese water supplies with mercury disposal.

Among those involved in the suit against Showa Denko are body builders and athletes who used L-tryptophan to build stronger bodies. Some hope for a settlement by summer, but Cassar said that it is unlikely because the firm is "stonewalling."

Charlene and Lee Garwood of Troy are suing. Both suffer from EMS.

"When I was diagnosed, I was just so relieved to finally have an answer," Charlene said. "I didn't care about a lawsuit. It was the health thing I was interested in." She is now dependent on a wheelchair or walker for mobility.

Since then, "I've decided they definitely have to pay for what they've done to me. I'm 35 years old. They should see what I go through daily. They have to pay for that."

IN A CONTINUING search for effective treatment, the Garwoods recently completed an experimental flushing process. The treatment most often prescribed is steroids and prednisone, neither of which has proven effective.

And the lack of an effective treatment is causing people to despair.

"I'm angry, angry and afraid I'll never get well," Nofz said. Wright tries to stay optimistic, "but all I've done is gotten worse." Both used L-tryptophan in the mistaken belief it was a "natural, non-addictive product."

The EMS Support Group meets at 8 p.m. the second Tuesday of the month in Classroom A on the 10th floor of Beaumont Hospital, 13 Mile and Woodward Avenue, Royal Oak. For more information, call 583-2855.



SHARON LAMICUX/staff photographer

Dental hygienist Connie Nofz says she feels lucky that she is still working. The Farmington Hills resident is painfully impaired and fears the day she will no longer be able to hold down a job.