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## IVF Quandary

*Q. Dr. Hilgers, I know good Catholic couples (who can provide for the baby and give them a good Catholic home) who are puzzled about the Church's opposition to in vitro fertilization. Can medical science offer them any real hope since how they "get" a baby does matter? – Omaha Archdiocesan Priest*

A. Certainly, Father. Having a miscarriage or having recurrent miscarriages (loss of two or more pregnancies) is a real problem for many women and couples. Spontaneous loss of pregnancy (also referred to as miscarriage or spontaneous abortion) prior to the 20th week of gestation occurs in about 15 percent of pregnancies. When a miscarriage occurs, both the mother and the father tend to experience a significant sense of loss.

Two years ago, we compiled a book, *In Their Own Words: Women Healed*, with testimonies from women who underwent NaProTechnology treatment programs for a variety of gynecologic and reproductive problems. Five of the fifty stories are from women who experienced multiple miscarriages. These women tell about their frustration at being told "there was no need to do any testing until [they] had three miscarriages because it probably would not happen again". They express "shock and sorrow knowing that there had to be a reason for the losses but...not know[ing] where to find them". They describe feeling "numb and very devastated...so empty inside", "walk[ing] around with a heavy heart", and being "frightened at the thought of trying for another baby".

Miscarriages are often viewed—even within the medical profession—as "normal" or as "nature's way" of ending a doomed pregnancy. This medical event should not be taken lightly. No miscarriage can be considered normal—all miscarriages are the result of a pathophysiologic reproductive event. Determining the specific cause of a miscarriage is difficult. However, factors that contribute to miscarriage include genetic, endocrinologic, anatomic, immunologic, and microbiologic variations. Spontaneous loss of pregnancy is frequently associated with infertility. Also correlated with miscarriage is advancing age of the mother.

Our medical approach is that one miscarriage is one too many! NaProTracking menstrual and fertility cycles with the Creighton Model FertilityCare System is fundamental for detecting diseases or hormonal dysfunctions, which can cause miscarriage, before a woman even becomes pregnant! Women at high risk for miscarriage often see patterns of premenstrual spotting, very little cervical mucus, and variable lengths of time or short lengths of time between ovulation and the beginning of their next menstruation on their Creighton Model chart. These biomarkers not only help to determine those women who are at an elevated risk of infertility but can also provide insight into the problems underlying a woman's inability to carry a pregnancy to term. For example, we commonly find women with low levels of the hormones that are needed to support a pregnancy; this makes them incapable of sustaining a pregnancy. We can then correct these underlying problems and/or implement hormonal support before and during pregnancy, thereby effectively reducing or eliminating the likelihood of miscarriage.

We effectively tackle miscarriages and prematurity with the Prematurity Prevention Program of the Pope Paul VI Institute. NaProTechnology treatment protocols most often involve the natural hormones progesterone (which helps sustain pregnancy) and/or human chorionic gonadotropin (or HCG, which is a

hormone produced during pregnancy that helps the ovulated, collapsed follicle—the corpus luteum—to produce progesterone until the 10th to 12th week of pregnancy, at which time the placenta produces progesterone). Whereas standard practice is to evaluate a pregnant woman's hormone levels by the trimester of her pregnancy, the NaProTechnology-based National Hormone Laboratory (part of the National Center for Women's Health at the Pope Paul VI Institute) can evaluate a woman's hormone levels for every two weeks during the course of her pregnancy. Other effective treatments also include cervical cerclage (sewing the cervix closed), antibiotic-specific treatment for the uterine lining susceptible to low-grade infection, and surgery for anatomic problems (e.g., endometriosis). One of our published studies in 2004 showed that patients with three or more miscarriages, a NaProTechnology protocol of hormone supplementation had an amazing success rate of approximately 69 percent.

Effective treatments for prevention of miscarriage are a way to fulfill the Church's mission in healing the sick. Women who experience miscarriages become acutely aware of their body's failing them. With the burgeoning medical science of NaProTechnology, the disease processes that cause a woman's body to miscarry the baby within her womb can be corrected in a way that respects her dignity, the rights of the child (right to life and right to be conceived of his parents mutual act of self-giving), preserves the pregnancy, and heals an otherwise devastating situation for the couple and their family. Treating women and couples with repetitive miscarriages not only heals physically but also lifts them emotionally and spiritually.

One of my patients in *Women Healed* illustrates this holistic approach to healing in her testimony. She was 40 years old and experienced four miscarriages in two years before the birth of her son. About this, she shares, "After three miscarriages, each one not long after the other, my emotions were overwhelming. I wanted a baby so badly that at times I felt a physical pain...I was going through depression..." In the year following the birth of her son (her fifth pregnancy), she felt that she was "ready to give up, just so very thankful that God had given us our child...I asked [a lady in Wal-Mart] if they were ALL her children, and she said yes. I said 'You have been blessed to have so many children.' She told me it had not been easy and that she had also had several miscarriages...[a NaProTechnology doctor] had helped her 'get pregnant' and 'stay pregnant.'" About learning the Creighton Model System and having her low progesterone levels, hormonal abnormalities and endometriosis treated with NaProTechnology, she writes, "[W]e were amazed! I never knew that I could know so much about my own body, AND, in addition, through the charting process, determine where I was at any given point in my cycle. I, once again, could not understand why OB/GYN doctors were not giving this information to their patients. ... We are thankful every day for the gifts God has given us in [our two children]. They are both miracles. And we are also thankful for our six little angels that are with Him now in Heaven."



**Thomas W. Hilgers, MD**

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The Home of **FertilityCare™** and **NaProTECHNOLOGY™**

**Building a Culture of Life in Women's Health Care**

Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
you have given the world its true light,  
Jesus, your Son—the Son of God,  
you abandoned yourself completely  
to God's call  
and thus became a wellspring  
of the goodness which flows forth from him.  
Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.  
Teach us to know and love him,  
so that we too can become  
capable of true love  
and be fountains of living water  
in the midst of a thirsting world.  
~Closing Prayer of the Encyclical Letter "Deus Caritas Est",  
Benedict XVI, December 25, 2005.

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[www.popepaulvi.com](http://www.popepaulvi.com)

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### Chapel of the Holy Family

Open business days, 8:00 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

#### Mass Schedule

8:30 a.m. Mondays and 1st/3rd Fridays

#### Adoration

8:15 a.m. to 9:15 a.m. Thursdays

• **Rev. Edward Richard M.S., D. TH. M., J.D.**

For ethics and questions

(314) 792-6107 or richard@kenrick.edu

Direct all other questions to:

Sue Hilgers: (402) 390-6600 ext. 149 or suehilg@aol.com.

## Pope Paul VI Institute Directory

• **FertilityCare™ Center of Omaha**

To learn the Creighton Model FertilityCare System

(402) 392-0842 or [fcoco@popepaulvi.com](mailto:fcoco@popepaulvi.com)

Co-directors: Jeanice Winduska, Kathy Chervosky

• **National Center for Women's Health**

For clinic questions:

(402) 390-6600

Linda Cady (Dr. Hilger's head nurse)

For medical questions:

(402) 390-9167 or [lrgreen@popepaulvi.com](mailto:lrgreen@popepaulvi.com)

Terrt Green (Dr. Hilgers' personal administrator)

• **Creighton Model FertilityCare  
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For FertilityCare provider education.

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Margaret Howard, Alice Sales.

• **Center for NaProEthics**

For ethics questions and consults.

(402) 390-0812 or [ethics@popepaulvi.com](mailto:ethics@popepaulvi.com)

Sr. Renee Mirkes, OSF, PhD