

Mad Science

by **Rachelle Oldmixon**

On Fertility Clinics and Uncomfortable Boyfriends



Wendy Chang (far right), here with Drs. Mark Surrey and Carrie Wambach, was really a wonderful host during my time at the Southern California Reproductive Center. (Thank you!)

“Where did you say you were going?”

The look on my boyfriend’s face was an amusing mix of alarm, concern, confusion and fear.

“I’m off to the new fertility clinic in town. I have an appointment.”

The concern and confusion dropped away, leaving a look of pure terror on his face. It occurred to me I might have forgotten to give him the whole story.

“Oh, no! No. No. No. No. I’m meeting with **Dr. Wendy Chang** to discuss the practice’s available procedures, their facilities and their equipment. For the *Sentinel!*” My boyfriend relaxed (I think), and I hopped in the car to meet Dr. Chang.

When I arrived at the **Southern California Reproductive Center** in Santa Barbara, I was stunned by how beautiful the space was. Blue walls and modern designs made me feel as if I was in a (very stylish) friend’s home. When I commented on the feel of the waiting room, Dr. Chang explained that fertility concerns can be very stressful for their patients and so it was important that the non-medical space be as relaxing as possible, which (as far as I could see) meant making the place look as little like a doctor’s office as possible.

It’s also noteworthy that although the Reproductive Center is right on State Street, the office is located around the

back of the building. I can only presume that several patients will appreciate the privacy of the location.

Before I saw the facilities, Dr. Chang offered to give me a quick reproductive lesson. Despite being a little worried about a flashback to eighth grade health class, I agreed.

And I soon found myself surprised that what I learned is not taught in every high school health course.

The facts stayed the same: Women are born with all the eggs they will ever develop, about 300-400. Men essentially produce sperm continuously after puberty. No news there. But what Dr. Chang then brought to the table is something that few people consider.

Because a woman is born with all her eggs, those eggs age with her and are exposed to every environmental factor she is. This puts eggs at greater risk throughout a woman’s life. Therefore, the older a woman is when she gives birth, the greater the risk is of the baby developing incorrectly. Once women reach about the age of thirty, these risks start to become concerning, as does the number of remaining healthy eggs.

You learn something every day.

It’s Baby Time!

With all that said, Dr. Chang and her colleagues are aware that women are starting their families later in life and



Even the incomparable Mayor Helene Schneider made an appearance at the new facility. (We’re lucky to have it here in SB.)



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that many women are not ready to start a family in their twenties. To help women who think they may want to start a family, just not before they are thirty, the Southern California Reproductive Center offers **vitrification**.

Essentially, they will collect and preserve some of your younger, healthy eggs for later use. By removing eggs from the body, they are no longer exposed to environmental factors and a woman’s aging.

“Freezing” eggs used to be a gamble for women. Eggs contain a lot of water molecules, which form ice crystals when frozen. Those crystals would often pierce the organelles within the egg, rendering it useless.

The Reproductive Center uses a different technique. They remove as much of the water as possible from the egg and freeze the dehydrated egg. This process is FDA approved, and over 90% effective.

Of course, saving eggs for later use is only for those who do not want to start a family immediately. For those who do, but are having trouble conceiving, the Center offers fertility testing and **in vitro fertilization (IVF)**. Eggs and sperm are taken from the parents and the egg is fertilized in a lab. The embryo is then developed for a short while outside the womb before it is implanted back inside the mother.

The process is expensive, and (if you remember from old episodes of *Friends*) a little risky. Sometimes the embryos don’t “take,” and sometimes the embryos are not viable from the moment they are implanted. The equipment that the Center uses cuts down on the likelihood that the embryo will experience environmental stress during in vitro development, making IVF much more successful. In



Micro-incubators coincidentally labeled “Cook?” It’s baby time!

many fertility labs, IVF embryos are kept together in large incubation chambers. These chambers are opened every time any of the embryos needs to be checked, tested or otherwise observed. Opening the incubator each time changes the environment and puts all the embryos at greater risk.

And so the Reproductive Center in Santa Barbara uses micro-incubators. Each woman’s embryos are placed in their own incubator equipped with an embryoscope to monitor the embryo automatically and take still images every twenty minutes or so. This new technology maintains a preferable and more stable environment for the embryos and avoids unnecessary handling.

While the equipment had me itching to get back in a lab of my own, I was also blown away by Dr. Chang’s commitment to community outreach. She and her colleagues are committed to reproductive health education. Perhaps one day soon, we will see this new center as a pillar in the community. It is already a great resource with some of the most knowledgeable and compassionate people you will meet.

Even if talking about it still makes my boyfriend uncomfortable.

The Southern California Reproductive Center is located at 1722 State Street, Suite 203. Call (805) 569-1950 or check out www.scrivf.com for details.



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