

Families focus on baby-to-be after the initial shock of in-vitro mix-up

He'll go home with biological parents

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That was the day Shannon and Paul Morell were to go to a fertility clinic — as they had done before to conceive their now 2-year-old twin girls — and start the process of expanding their family by unthawing six embryos they had stored away.

But the clinic called the metro Detroit couple first, on Feb. 17, and asked them to come in.

"They basically just said, there has been a terrible mistake and our embryos have been unthawed," Shannon Morell — whose hometown has been reported as being Troy, but who wouldn't confirm where she lives — said Thursday.

One embryo survived and was implanted in an Ohio woman.

"She was pregnant."

Toledo-area resident Carolyn Savage — now carrying the Morells' baby boy — decided to continue with the pregnancy.

Like the Morells, both 39, the Savages wouldn't name the clinic. Along with their attorney, Detroit lawyer Brian McKeen, they declined to elaborate.

Mix-ups at clinics such as this, experts said, are rare.

But that doesn't soften the blow to both couples, who will be forever linked by the baby set to be born within a matter of weeks.

"Our focus," Savage, 40, said, "has been on the health of this baby."

A gift, no matter what

Sean Savage was in his Toledo-area office one February afternoon — his pregnant wife, Carolyn, was home sick with the flu — when his cell phone rang.

It was their doctor. The embryo, now growing, wasn't theirs.

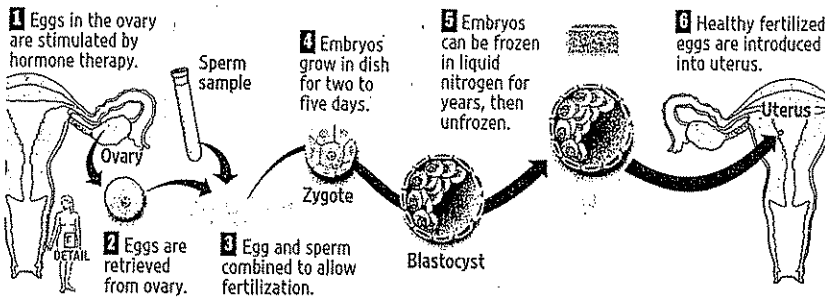
Sean, now 39, rushed home, found his wife in bed and fumbled for the right words.

"I sat straight up and I accused him of joking even though there was nothing on his face to tell me he was really joking," Carolyn said.

"He was white as a ghost."

The doctor told the couple, who have three children ranging in age from 18 months to 15 years, that they could remove

How in-vitro fertilization works



Sources: Food and Drug Administration and Genetics and IVF Institute

DAVID PIERCE/Detroit Free Press



ROBIN ERB/Detroit Free Press

the embryo or Carolyn could stop taking hormones that were supporting the pregnancy.

But terminating the pregnancy wasn't an option. They saw the child as a gift handed to the wrong recipient.

Dr. Alan Penzias, a Boston-based in-vitro fertilization specialist and a board member for the American Fertility Association, said these cases are so rare that he speculates "human error, not mal-intent, will prove to be the root cause."

Victims of a rare error

It happens that Shannon

Morell's maiden name is Savage — but the Ohio couple said they are not related.

Shannon Morell wouldn't comment on whether the clinic may have had her maiden name on file, saying: "I go by my married name."

Having found success with in-vitro fertilization once before, she recognized that such an error is uncommon.

Patricia Mendell, a licensed social worker who cochairs the American Fertility Association Board of Directors, said the nation's estimated 400 fertility clinics are required to adhere to strict state and fed-

eral procedures for in-vitro fertilization treatments.

Penzias, in a statement, said that, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 300,000 embryos were implanted in 132,262 cycles of in-vitro fertilization in 2007.

"These incidents are rare and patients should feel assured that the majority of centers follow these rigorous guidelines," Mendell said in a statement.

"When these rare accidents do occur, it can be not only psychologically devastating to the couples involved in this mix-up, but emotionally damaging to the thousands of patients who are currently receiving or starting fertility treatments."

Shannon Morell said the Savages have "recognized the child was not theirs," but she still plans to keep them updated on what's happening with the baby once he's born.

"We don't know the long-term implications of this," she said. "It's just been heart-wrenching on both sides."

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