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Herald Sun

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Doing away with donors

Milanda Rout, science reporter
21jun05

INFERTILE couples may be able to conceive in the future after Melbourne researchers found a way to create eggs from stem cells.

Scientists at Monash University have developed a technique that allows embryonic stem cells to change into ovary-like structures containing eggs.

Although the study was done using stem cells from mice, researchers hope it may lead to a new infertility treatment for sterile women who usually rely on donor eggs.

The discovery means eggs grown from embryonic stem cells could be implanted with DNA from an infertile woman.

The eggs containing the mother's genetic material would then be fertilised and implanted into the woman through IVF.

"Some people just don't have eggs or sperm and there's little we can do for them except use donor material," researcher Dr Orly Lacham-Kaplan said.

"The ability to develop eggs in vitro could primarily assist sterile women but also could reduce the ongoing strain on donor egg programs."

Scientists in 2003 found stem cells could spontaneously change into eggs in a test tube of fetal calf serum. But replication had not been successful until now.

Dr Lacham-Kaplan, of Monash's Immunology and Stem Cell Laboratories, used testicular cells as a nursery to allow the stem cells to change into eggs.

But Dr Lacham-Kaplan also issued a caution about the research, saying there was still a long way to go.

"At this stage the eggs obtained from the process are at an early stage of development," she said.

"Further studies are required to explore whether they're normal and able to mature and participate in fertilisation and embryo development."

The Melbourne scientist presented her findings yesterday at the European Society for Human reproduction and Embryology's annual meeting in Denmark.

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Also announced at the meeting was similar research conducted by British scientists, except in human embryonic cells.

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The researchers, from the University of Sheffield, have proved that embryonic stem cells can develop into early forms of cells that become eggs or sperm.

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"Ultimately it might be possible to produce sperm and eggs for use in assisted conception treatments," said the university's Prof Harry Moore.

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"This is a long way off and we would have to prove it was safe because, for example, the culture process may cause genetic changes."

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