



Area company markets new aid to conception

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By Kathleen Longcore

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Jordyn Dillard may have a new brother or sister in time for her third birthday in October, thanks to an at-home conception kit set for a global launch this month by a West Michigan company.

After months of trying to conceive their second child, George and Saheedah Dillard, of Kentwood, used the kit's Conception Cap before it was on the market but already approved for use.

The kit was designed for women having trouble getting pregnant but who have not been diagnosed with a serious infertility problem.

"They could try this at home before they try expensive infertility treatments," said Dr. Dorsey Ligon, a Grand Rapids obstetrician and gynecologist who gave the kit to Saheedah, 28.

The kit is the invention of a Saranac firm, Conceivev Inc., which this month began selling it by prescription on the Internet and by phone. It sells for \$459.

Michael La Vean, who patented the Conception Cap, founded the firm in 2003. A longtime Grand Rapids child advocate, Nannette Bowler, is chief executive.

The cap is a plastic, thimble-shaped device designed to hold semen. It is placed snugly against the cervix, where it can be worn comfortably for hours and increase the odds of conception.

"It's simple, private and inexpensive" when compared to the cost of other fertility treatments, Ligon said.

But a Grand Rapids fertility expert is not a fan, saying the product is expensive and unnecessary.

"Historically there isn't any data to support the use of this," said Dr. Douglas C. Daly, a specialist at Grand Rapids Fertility.

"Products like this have not been popular because they don't have a significant impact on pregnancy rates. It's not going to do the patient any harm. But most women who ovulate normally will get pregnant on their own," Daly said.

But the Dillards are believers.

"It worked for us, and it was convenient," Saheeda Dillard said. "I didn't want to try (fertility) medications because I didn't want to risk having twins or triplets. But that was the next step if this didn't work."

The kit will be marketed to the 10 to 20 percent of women whose infertility is unexplained or unknown. In 2002, more than 7 million women in the U.S. were unable to get pregnant or carry a child to term, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

The kit is not for women with serious ovulation problems, locked fallopian tubes or a history of endometriosis, Ligon said.

The kit also may be used by women who want to time their pregnancies.

"It enhances their chances of hitting a target date," he said.

Ligon is heading a clinical trial here to see if women can read and understand the kit's directions. By the end of June, 30 women will have tried the kit and filled out a questionnaire about its use.

Other doctors involved in the trial in Grand Rapids include John LaGrand, Calvin Leazenby and Charles Barker. Midwife Mary Anne George also is participating.

Conceivex recently sent information about the product to 12,000 doctors in the Midwest.

It was approved by the Food and Drug Administration two years ago, an approval that means the device is safe but does not address whether it is effective.

Before getting FDA approval, the device was tested on cows. Tests showed it had no adverse effects on any aspect of conception, said Bowler said.

Bowler said the kit is the only at-home conception product on the market that is approved in the U.S., Canada and Europe. It is also ISO- certified, which assures strict quality standards.

"This is huge," Bowler said. "We had to go through some very rigorous studies. But we can now market it abroad."

Bowler was previously was a Ionia County probate judge, headed the state's Family Independence Agency and co-founded the Children's Law Center in Grand Rapids.

Michael La Vean now holds 11 gynecological product patents in the U.S. and abroad. One of his devices was named Gynecological Innovation of the Year in France and Italy in 1999, he said.

The Conception Cap was based on the couple's experience with birth control.

Janet LaVean couldn't take a birth control pill, so they sought out a contraceptive cervical cap from England.

"We thought we could do better," he said. They came up with their own design and formed a company to market it. But they had trouble getting it approved in the U.S. because of controversy surrounding any form of birth control.

It got swift approval in France, La Vean said. "In France they were interested in safety, not moral issues," he said.

All the literature with the Conception Kit is in both French and English, a requirement to market the product in Canada. And the staff at Conceivex is bilingual.

La Vean, who lives in his grandfather's pre-Civil War house in Saranac, was the former village president and also district chair for Michigan Democrats.

That's how he met Bowler. He was her campaign manager when she ran for the judgeship. She was appointed by the governor in 2003 but lost her race for a new term.

Based in Saranac, Conceivex is using 14 other Michigan companies to manufacture and distribute the kits.

The Conception Kit

What: Conception Kit, produced by Saranac firm Conceivex Inc.

Who: For women who have trouble conceiving but have not been diagnosed with a serious infertility problem

Cost: \$459 for a three-month kit