

MELBOURNE'S
FERTILITY QUEEN

“If there
is a God,
it's her”

Dr Lynn Burmeister, dubbed “the baby whisperer”, has assisted in the conception of countless babies, including Kaiden (left) and Jack.

She's the fertility specialist at the top of her field, offering hope to thousands of Australian women struggling to conceive. **Sue Smethurst** meets **Dr Lynn Burmeister**.

DOZENS AND DOZENS of baby pictures and thank-you notes decorate the walls of Dr Lynn Burmeister's rooms. They are the cherubic faces of precious little people who might not have been born, if not for the uncanny baby-making talent of this fertility "guru".

The vivacious doctor who says she "lives and breathes" baby-making, is so successful at helping women who've all but lost hope to become pregnant, she has been lovingly dubbed "the baby whisperer" by grateful patients and peers.

On baby blogs, online chat rooms and even in the offices of rival fertility clinics, she has earned a reputation as the woman who can weave a magical mothering spell when no one else can.

For years, the Melbourne mother of two's cutting-edge talents have been known among Australia's fertility fraternity. Yet, last November, her work was recognised on the world stage when she performed Australia's first successful ovarian tissue transplant, helping a young Melbourne breast cancer survivor to become pregnant after cancer treatment left her infertile.

The successful transplant unlocks a scientific door not only for fertility, but it may revolutionise menopause, allowing women to postpone symptoms.

"It means women may be able to have periods longer, which has [an] impact on bone health, heart health, all sorts of

areas, so I guess it's pretty exciting, but there's a lot more work to be done yet."

Colleagues say that her work could change the lives of millions of women around the world. "It's a game-changer, a life-changer, groundbreaking," says New York's leading IVF specialist, Dr Zev Rosenwaks.

Yet for Dr Burmeister, it's all in a day's work. "Making babies is what drives me," she says, humbly. "When women come to see me, I feel like I've got a mission to get them pregnant. When I see the pregnancy results come in, I tick them off! Mission accomplished!"

NEW MUM Elise Toomey Brown describes Dr Lynn Burmeister as a "miracle worker – if there is a God, it is her". With five-month-old Kaiden nestled in her arms, Elise is just one of hundreds of women pinching themselves that they've become parents after being told it could never happen.

"From the time I was 19, I was told that having children would be difficult," says the 34-year-old, whose infertility was caused by the unique combination of an unusual heart-shaped uterus and a rare auto-immune disease from severe eczema she'd suffered since childhood.

Three different doctors told Elise that her uterus could not be fixed and if she did miraculously fall pregnant, her auto-immune system was so suppressed from years of aggressive eczema drugs that she was unlikely to carry a baby to full-term.

"By the time I saw Lynn, I'd had multiple miscarriages and it was so devastating I took the most extreme action I could and went to the Dead Sea in Jordan in the hope of curing my skin so I could have a baby. I literally travelled to the lowest point on earth," Elise says.

When she returned, Dr Burmeister prescribed Elise a basic steroid used to treat asthma in children for the eczema,

then performed laparoscopic surgery to explore Elise's uterus.

"Before I went in to surgery, she told me that if she could fix it, she would, but I didn't hold any hope because I'd been told so many times it was inoperable. When I woke up, she was standing right beside me with her hand on my shoulder and she said, 'Congratulations, I've operated and you'll be able to have children'."

Six weeks later, Elise was pregnant. "Every day, when I look at my son, I just thank God that I was lucky enough to meet her. She's a guru and we can never thank her enough," she says.

Dr Burmeister talks about "babysitting embryos" and "getting the recipe right", which is not far from the truth of how she has been so successful. She says there's no secret formula or wild and whacky potions, it's all about the basics.

"Getting pregnant is a bit like creating a recipe and sometimes the recipe might not have the right ingredient, like hormones, so we work out what's right for the patient, from the start," she says. "I look at the overall picture of the patient because, in some cases, it can be a relatively minor adjustment that brings a baby along. I pull apart everything that's been done before and start from scratch."

Many of her patients are referred to her by fellow obstetricians who've done all they can, or by grateful mums spreading the word.

"I think I do get women pregnant that maybe other doctors haven't," Dr Burmeister says, "and I do get a lot of women coming to me seeking second opinions after they've been told there's no hope."

"Some patients have been on IVF for years and they're not getting pregnant, but no one's taken a look inside to see what's going on. I get frustrated when I see things that haven't been done properly because it upsets me that people have had to battle for such a long time when perhaps they needn't have. I won't knock back >

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Elise Toomey Brown (seated with her son Kaiden) and Melissa Allardice (with Jack) are ecstatic that after years of uncertainty and emotional turmoil, Dr Lynn Burmeister (left) was able to help them conceive.

patients. I try to see everyone I can as soon as possible because it might make the difference between them having a baby or not. But, equally, I am frank if I can't help someone – I won't give false hope."

At medical school, she fell in love with the idea of making babies and spent time with fertility pioneers Professor Carl Wood and Professor Gab Kovacs. Inspired by their work, she sought a fellowship to train under America's most revered fertility specialist, Dr Zev Rosenwaks at New York's prestigious Cornell University.

"We rarely take fellows from outside the United States," he says, "but we knew she was special the moment we met her. So, instead of taking an American, we took Lynn and it paid off. She was wonderful – wonderful with patients, wonderful in surgery and so passionate about her work. It was clear right from the start she was going to be a leader in the field."

Dr Burmeister credits a lot of her success to working with Dr Rosenwaks. "A lot of my success is maybe based on a gut feeling I have about the patient, but a lot is also based on what I learnt in New York. Zev taught me that IVF is an art. It's not just about slapping people on drugs and following protocol books. It's actually an art form to get the picture right."

Among the complex cases Dr Burmeister has taken on, there's been an 18-year-old girl with menopause, a 52-year-old woman who got pregnant with donor eggs and a mother who carried her daughter's baby because her daughter was born without a uterus.

And then there was Melissa Allardice. "I'll never forget the first appointment with Lynn," Melissa says. "She said straight up, 'I'm going to throw everything I can at you, I hope you're up for it.' I was

ecstatic because I'd found someone who was going to leave no stone unturned."

Melissa and her husband, Geoff, met later in life and, at 40, began trying to start a family. They were realistic that getting pregnant could be tough, but never expected the rollercoaster ride they endured. After 12 unsuccessful IVF cycles over three and a half years, they changed clinics and came to Lynn. Eight months after their first appointment, Melissa was pregnant. "We were told so many times that our infertility was unexplained," Melissa says. "All the scans, blood tests, procedures and operations, and continued failures, cycle after cycle. It was devastating. Lynn said straight up, 'I know you've had surgery, but I want to go in and see for myself.'"

When Dr Burmeister did a routine laparoscopy, she found one of Melissa's tubes was toxic and the other blocked. She clipped the toxic tube, unblocked the remaining healthy tube – and Melissa fell pregnant. Baby Jack is now 20 weeks old.

"I cry when I think about what she has been able to achieve for us," Melissa says. "At 44, we were worried it might never happen for us. We can't believe how lucky we are to have him."

Dr Burmeister is at pains to point out that not every patient she sees falls pregnant and she sends a warning to would-be mothers not to leave it too late. "I think we've given women a false sense of hope over the years that it's easy to have babies when you are over 35, but it's not," she says. "The most common problem I see is women who've left it too late. IVF tends not to work for women over 45 and although I'm determined to get people

pregnant, I don't believe in giving false hope and I can be very direct about it."

Dr Rosenwaks says we are just beginning to see the depth of Dr Burmeister's talents.

He believes she is at the forefront of global fertility and endocrinological health, and women all over the world will benefit.

"Australian women are lucky to have her," he says. "I expect her to carry on being a leader in this field for a long time to come and she will leave a huge legacy in the world of women's health." ■

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