

Written Testimony of Dana John Onifer, MD.

Committee on Public Health and Welfare, Kansas Senate  
February 20-21, 2013

To the Distinguished Chair, Ranking Member and Honored Members of the Committee.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Dana Onifer. I am a Family Physician currently serving in the United States Navy, I have been married to my wife, Jewell, for 21 years and we have a son, Joseph who is a rambunctious and exploratory 2 year-old, that my wife and I adopted. Prior to our adoption, though, my wife and I pursued several assisted reproduction treatment modalities in an effort to have children.

Though I am a physician, I am not here today as a medical expert or to speak specifically about medical technology. I am here to share our story and some of the difficulties we experienced in the hopes of helping to protect other families from similar hardship.

- My wife and I first started using medical treatment for infertility around 2004. We had been married since 1992, but had only been deliberate about wanting to have children since around 2000.
- Initially, we used home-based methods: a fertility monitor, body temperature readings, and ovulatory timing, along with various less than evidence based tips and tricks to try to conceive. We were unsuccessful. We pursued diagnostic testing and were diagnosed with idiopathic infertility.
- We began discussion about our next steps, such as Clomid or IUI or IVF. I said to my wife at one point, "Would Abraham have used Clomid or would he have just trusted God?" She replied, "You're not Abraham," which is true, I don't have God's personal promise for countless descendants. OK, fair enough. We tried Clomid.
- After several rounds of Clomid, we were unsuccessful so we went to the next step, intra-uterine insemination, or IUI. After 5 rounds of IUI, we were still unsuccessful.
- This began a long conversation on what we can and should do, what is right and good, what is over-reaching, what is off limits. Things like donors and surrogacy were completely put out of bounds.
- I don't want to do IVF because I know how that works in the Wild West of ART in the USA. Jewell says, "You would treat me if I had lung cancer, well I have infertility, why not treat that?" OK, but what is a good, right and Christ-honoring treatment? I don't know if IVF is good or right or Christ-honoring.
- I received a brochure from the Christian Medical and Dental Association on embryo adoption. We start to talk about that, about being the birth parents of our adopted child. It seems odd, it is odd, but we would be able to experience pregnancy and child birth.

- We started the process and drove out for our initial interview. We were very specific about two embryos because we were ready for two children. We show up for transfer and are shown a picture of three embryos. I ask, “What about two?” “The probability of all three surviving is very small. It’s most likely only two or maybe even one will survive implantation,” the doctor re[plies]. I am not happy and begin to make that known. Jewell touches my arm: “God will give us the grace for what he will give us.” And this is also true, but in the meantime I have now been given a moral, fiscal, and spiritual dilemma that I tried to avoid.
- Somewhere in me an evil gear starts to spin: “God could you just kill off one of them. We’re ready for two but three may be too much.” I knew that gear was in me, which is why I was very deliberate about saying “two.” Now I have to pray not only for three babies, but for the grace to not want one of them to die because people didn’t adhere to my directions.
- Embryo adoption fails. We weep, we talk, think, read, pray. Should we do IVF? I do not find an inherent evil in the procedure itself, as is the case with most technology, only how it is applied. We agree on two eggs to make two embryos to make two babies. All of the previous reasoning applies.
- We start the IVF work up and again, we are very clear at multiple visits – 2 and only 2 babies. We are offered various other permutations of more than two but we are steadfast. January 18th we go in for egg harvest. It is our 17th wedding anniversary. On January 21st we return for embryo transfer are told that they successfully fertilized all seven eggs. Seven, not two, not even three, but seven.
- And again, the moral, fiscal, spiritual dilemma that I tried to avoid has been thrust upon me after I have deliberately try to avoid it. What are my courses of action? 1. Implant them all and deal with X number of babies, which is X-2 more than I was ready to deal with but until I figure that out I will have to pay for my children to be kept in a freezer; 2. Give them up for adoption, not because I don’t want them or made a foolish decision, but because someone else ignored my wishes and thrust me into this realm of uncertainty; 3. Donate them for research (which I consider chattel slavery on a cellular level); or 4. Just let them die. All of these have burdens that have been forced upon me which I not only didn’t ask for but deliberately sought to avoid.
- I now have 7 children to worry about, to plan for to consider. I know that they probably will not all survive, but until they die I must now pray for all of them, and the evil gear that was spinning before is spinning 5 times harder.
- Who will pay for these other children, their diapers, their clothes, their bicycles, their college funds? As a customer, I had no recourse but complaint. No one is going to refund my money, no one is going to give me financial assistance. There are no protections for me. I have no recourse.
- About 2 weeks later the pregnancy test is negative. I wake up in the middle of the night and my wife is sobbing, “I can’t stop thinking that I have my dead babies inside me.” Yes, and now we may have to go through this two more times.

- Every time I speak to people about ART, people who are pursuing that for their family, I tell them: know what you want, write it down, give it to your doctors, make them read it, have them sign it and put it in your medical record, because there is no one to protect you but you.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think you have an opportunity to not only help protect the people and families of the state of Kansas, but also to create a template for how we can bring sensible control over this unfettered technology and hopefully save other families the anxiety and anguish and pain that my family suffered.