

Study seeks couples who want to avoid pregnancy the natural way

WASHINGTON - Richard Fehring is looking for a few good couples.

More than a few, actually.

The director of the Natural Family Planning Institute at Marquette University in Milwaukee hopes to recruit 650 couples over the next two years to test the effectiveness of two methods of natural family planning and the couples' satisfaction with each method.

With a \$595,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the couples will be randomly placed into a group using the sympto-thermal method of natural family planning - which involves monitoring of the woman's daily waking temperature, changes in cervical fluid, cycle length and other signs of fertility - or the ovulation method, based on changes in cervical fluid.

But the study will involve some high-tech tools not usually associated with natural family planning, including online discussion groups, electronic fertility tracking and a \$200 home-use fertility monitor that will be provided free to couples in the sympto-thermal group.

Couples in the other group also will receive the fertility monitor for free, but only after they complete a year of monitoring and logging changes in the woman's cervical mucus, as well as monthly charting of the strength of each partner's intention for avoiding pregnancy.

In a March 3 telephone interview with Catholic News Service, Mr. Fehring outlined

some of the requirements for participation in the study.

Women must be between the ages of 18 and 42, sexually active and in a committed relationship, with a menstrual cycle lasting 21 to 42 days. They must have stopped taking any oral or hormonal contraceptive and stopped breast-feeding at least three months before starting the study and have no known fertility problems.

Their male partners must be between 18 and 50, sexually active and in a committed relationship, with no known fertility problems. Both partners must intend for the woman not to become pregnant for the 12 months of the study.

Mr. Fehring said some people were offended that the study at a Catholic, Jesuit-run university is not limited to married couples. But because the study is federally funded through HHS' Office of Public Health and Science, it must be open to all scientifically valid participants, he said.

If either participant changes sexual partners during the year of the study, the couple must withdraw from participation.

The study was launched Feb. 12 and within the first month had recruited about 150 couples to participate, Fehring said. The initial advertising of the project was through two e-mails to lists of those interested in or involved in natural family planning around the country.

Teresa Notare, assistant director for the natural family planning program of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, also called on married couples to participate in a February notice to diocesan natural family planning coordinators and others on her mailing list.

In addition to measuring the effectiveness of the two natural family planning methods, the study also asks participants to assess their own satisfaction with the

method to which they are assigned. By asking participants periodically about the strength of their intention to avoid pregnancy, it also will measure whether mutual motivation is a factor in the effectiveness of the method, Mr. Fehring said.

He said the project will help to fill a scientific void in the area of natural family planning efficacy. The most recent randomized control studies took place in the 1970s and 1980s, and found that it was not very effective, he added.

But this study will focus on the two methods that have achieved the most success, and not on the “rhythm” or “calendar” methods that often are “self-devised” and based on “guesstimates,” Fehring said.

More information about the study is available online at <http://nfpstudy.marquette.edu/register.php>