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War-bound soldiers are banking their sperm in CNY

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Before male soldiers head to war zones, some are taking an extra precaution: They freeze their sperm.

Staff Sgt. Clifton Brown, of the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, served in Iraq in 2003-2004 and left in April for Kuwait. Before leaving for Kuwait, he went to CNY Fertility Center in Syracuse and banked his sperm.

He would have done it before going to Iraq, if he had known what he knows now, he said in an email from Kuwait.

Brown is one of at least 56 soldiers who have banked sperm at the CNY Fertility Center since 2005, said Dr. Robert Kiltz, who runs the center. They are motivated by a range of concerns: the risks of dying, losing fertility or encountering toxins that could alter their DNA. Others have pre-existing fertility issues or don't want to delay plans for a family.

For some, arranging "fertility insurance" joins making a will, scheduling bill payments and listing next-of-kin as one more thing to do before heading to war.

Brown, 28, and his wife, Jill, 29, have been married four years and don't have children. While he's away, Jill Brown will begin in-vitro fertilization treatments. She could conceive and give birth while he's away.

"Even if, God forbid, something were to happen to him, it would be my choice," she said. "It gives me kind of peace of mind."

The military's insurance, Tricare, does not pay for the process. Most labs offer some kind of discount for soldiers. Paperwork specifies what may be done with the sperm if the soldier dies.

Kiltz charges military personnel \$300 for the first visit and year of banking, \$150 for storage each year after. Soldiers represent a small percentage of Kiltz's patients. At his Syracuse office, a dozen stainless steel tanks the size of small beer kegs hold 4,000 vials frozen in liquid nitrogen.

Kiltz doesn't offer a similar way of preserving fertility to females. Freezing eggs is a newer, less foolproof technology, Kiltz said. While freezing can damage both sperm and eggs, healthy sperm samples contain millions of cells, while only a few eggs are released per ovulation cycle.

The Browns live at Fort Drum outside Watertown. They didn't hear about sperm banking through a military medical briefing, or the network of military families at the base. Jill Brown heard about Kiltz's services from co-workers at an elementary school in Pulaski.

The Army doesn't mention the option at medical briefings before soldiers head to war, said Eric Durr, a spokesman for the state Department of Military and Naval Affairs.

The Browns say the military should suggest the process as something to consider before going to war.

"It's not something that comes up easily in conversation," Jill said.

Patrick Campbell, an Iraq vet and legislative director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said the topic was mentioned to him before he left for Iraq at a briefing in Fort Hood, Texas.

"It wasn't part of the script," he said. "It was brought up informally, by one of those civilian presenters who said, 'By the way, if you have a wife, you might want to think about doing this.' "

Campbell, who had a girlfriend at the time, didn't.

California Cryobank began offering soldiers discounts in the early 1990s, when stories began to circulate about Gulf War veterans being infertile after being immunized against nerve gases, said Dr. Cappy Rothenberg, a director of the Cryobank.

"Unfortunately, not many took us up," he said. While numbers have increased, few do today.

Strong Fertility Center in Rochester has banked sperm for 15 soldiers since 2001, said Lori Barrette, a spokesperson.

Fairfax Cryobank, one of the nation's largest sperm banks, banks sperm for fewer than 100 soldiers a year, said Michael Buuck, director of client development.

Kathleen Carroll-Smith, a war widow in Austin, Texas, used in-vitro fertilization to conceive her son, Benton, after her husband, 2nd Lt. Brian Smith, was killed by a sniper in Iraq.

Benton Smith was born more than two years after his father died. It was another year and a half before Benton began receiving benefits as a dependent of a deceased veteran, his mother said. He gets medical insurance and a \$384-a-month stipend.

"We had to fight for it," said Carroll-Smith. "The birth date was post-death of the soldier, and the computer kept spitting it out."

She's not sure yet whether Benton will receive GI Bill education benefits.

But she's glad she persuaded her husband to get to the fertility clinic before he went to war.

"My dreams didn't end with Brian dying," she said.

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