

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Biological Crock

"Age and Infertility" by Jane Menken, James Trussell, and Ulla Larsen, in *Science* (Sept. 26, 1986), 1333 H St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Is infertility among women on the rise?

To judge by the number of physicians specializing in fertility problems, and the media's attention to the matter, inability to bear children is a spreading phenomenon, particularly for career women who delay starting a family until their 30s. Indeed, a widely noted 1982 French study showed alarming proportions of women unable to conceive by the end of 12 "insemination cycles," or one year—26 percent of those below age 30, 35 percent in the 30–34 age group, and 44 percent of those between ages 35 and 39. The message: Increasingly, women who wait risk waiting forever.

Nonsense, say Menken and Trussell, professors of sociology and economics at Princeton, and Larsen, a researcher at Sweden's Lunds University. Among other flaws in the French study, they note, was its one-year standard. That is too short: Research has shown that the mean time required for conception is about eight months, and that at least 14 percent of women who become pregnant take more than a year to do so.

While ability to bear children *does* decline with advancing age, the rate of decline has remained roughly stable since 1965. The chance of a woman not being able to bear a child rises from about five percent for those aged 20 to 24 to 16 percent at most for those aged 30 to 35. In later years, the proportion of women who cannot conceive does rise sharply—to 30 percent by age 40, and 60 percent by age 44.

Why has fear of infertility risen? The authors think that the effectiveness of fertility *control*—which in 20 years has lowered the rate of unwanted births in the United States from above 20 percent to below seven percent—has led people to believe, mistakenly, that "controlling fertility was the real problem" and that "having children is easy."

For women of childbearing age who suspect infertility, the authors prescribe patience and persistence. One study has shown that 41 percent of such women who obtained professional treatment subsequently became pregnant. But so did 35 percent of the women who did not.

RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

A Safe Dose?

"The Microwave Problem" by Kenneth R. Foster and Arther W. Guy, in *Scientific American* (Sept. 1986), 415 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Microwaves are everywhere. Occupying a band of the electromagnetic spectrum between radio signals and visible light, they emanate from such common sources as air traffic control systems, police and military radar, earth-to-satellite television broadcasting equipment, telephone lines, medical devices—and, of course, microwave ovens.

At high levels of intensity, the kind one endures while standing near a