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cover story

When all else fails, Antonia Ruhl, a former Brazilian model and TV celebrity, is the person to whom Melbourne women turn for help in having a baby. Greg Thom reports

Jungle babies



► **Fertility right:** Antonia Ruhl with twins Mia and Reuben, and Henry (front).

Picture: ANDREW TAUBER

HWT

DISAPPOINTED veterans of IVF aged in their late 30s and early 40s make a beeline for Antonia Ruhl's door, having been told by the medical establishment that their chances of falling pregnant are slim.

In Ruhl's natural-therapy clinic in Collins St the wannabe mums are introduced to the woman who says she can help them.

Forget modern medicine. Ruhl comes equipped with centuries-old secrets of jungle medicine she says she learned by spending two years living with an Amazon Indian tribe.

This mix of acupuncture, herbal remedies, detoxification and spiritual enlightenment appears to be achieving results that medical science cannot explain.

Take Tess Barrett's story. The 39-year-old from Fairfield visited Ruhl's clinic after six unsuccessful attempts at IVF in a frustrating four-year bid to start a family.

Tests had shown she had blocked fallopian tubes, one of them not healthy enough to produce eggs. Doctors had told Barrett her only chance of having children was through IVF.

"I had been to so many specialists and tried so many different things. I was just sick of it," she says.

Yet within seven weeks of beginning Antonia Ruhl's new-age regimen, Barrett was pregnant.

"It was incredible. Just amazing."

Jo, 41

JO TESORIERO turned to the IVF program after trying for 18 months to have her second child.

But the 41-year-old local government children's services manager from Brighton says she came away dejected by what she feels was a negative attitude.

"They told me that at my age my chances were not good. I came away feeling really sad, my energy just depleted," Tesoriero says.

It was her local GP who suggested she visit Dr Antonia Ruhl, who had helped a family member with the births of her three children.

Tesoriero noticed the difference immediately.

"Antonia was really positive and uplifting. Every time I left the clinic, I would feel like pregnancy was only a matter of time."

After six months of treatment, that time came in August last year. Nine weeks ago, Tesoriero gave birth to a girl named Lucia.

"I really believe it was Ruhl's treatment that was the key," Tesoriero says.

"My doctor couldn't believe it. He advised me to have an ultrasound because he thought the pregnancy was ectopic."

Not everyone is convinced.

Monash IVF medical director Prof. Gab Kovacs says anecdotal success stories are one thing, but independent, medically controlled trials are the only way to determine the worth of Ruhl's methods.

"Basically the problem is we don't know how many people would get pregnant without that treatment."

While stopping short of endorsing Ruhl's approach, Kovacs says he favours anything that helps couples struggling to start a family.

"People who want to get pregnant are often desperate and will try anything. These patients are very vulnerable. I'm a bit cynical because I have been around for a long time."

Ruhl is at pains to point out she is not a medical doctor and shouldn't be seen as one. Neither, she says, is she some sort of crackpot "voodoo witch-doctor" out to make money.

"I am not an evangelist here, trying to pitch anything."

NOR is she against modern medicine — far from it. Both her father and grandfather were doctors, and she believes her techniques are complementary rather than a radical alternative to Western medical procedures.

"I have a lady now, she is 49 and she is pregnant."

"Modern science asks me why? I have had doctors who ask how? Was it her own egg, or was it something else responsible? I have so many people who are 45, 47 who have healthy babies."

Ruhl says she is not here to prove anything to anyone.

"That's why I don't do any advertising. People come to me. I don't need to prove anything to anyone and my skills are not here to impress anyone. If I can help people, I am happy."

Ruhl, a former beauty queen, model and Brazilian TV celebrity who holds doctorates in Chinese medicine, philosophy and paranormal science, claims to have helped an astonishing 90 per cent of couples with fertility problems to have children.

The success rate for IVF is about 30 per cent.

Ruhl uses a combination of herbal tonics, diet adjustment and "needle pulse therapy", an acupuncture-like technique designed to stimulate the body's natural flow of electricity or "life force".

The aim is to reduce stress, increase blood supply to the uterus and improve egg and sperm quality. The rest is up to nature.

"I believe if you want to try to get pregnant, what you need to do is to balance your body like you are preparing a garden," Ruhl says.



she blacked out. Later, waking under a bright morning sun, she saw faces.

"The medicine man and this old lady came and said I was definitely the reincarnation of my great grandmother, because I had found my way back."

"That was when my training began."

Ruhl says she realised our body cells use electrical impulses to communicate. When these pathways become obstructed, problems such as infertility can arise.

She says she learned how to realign this life force by manipulating pressure points and using acupuncture.

The same theory applies to the plants she uses in her herbal tonics, which she manipulates until they are "pulsating with life".

Ruhl planned to spend six months in the village, but stayed two years.

"I took my son, I wanted to live there. It was beautiful, I loved it. But the paje told me, 'You came to learn. You must go out and share with other people.'"

RUHL eventually came to Melbourne, where she married an Australian and established Natural Stress Therapy in 1990.

She says she noticed an emerging trend among those coming to her for stress relief.

"People started coming in saying they have been trying so long to conceive and fall pregnant and that 'We don't know what to do.' I know that a huge part of infertility is stress."

Ruhl says she sees about 150 patients a week, about 100 of them for infertility-related issues.

She charges \$120 for a consultation — \$60 for each visit after that.

She claims to have helped more than 10,000 women, many of whom have become mothers for the first time in their 40s.

She regards this as completely natural: "Every 11 months we have brand new cells, so really, how old are we?"

"When someone says 'I haven't had my period for six months' or 'I'm 47 and my doctor says there's no way I can conceive', I'm very confident I can rebalance the body."

Ruhl expects healthy cynicism towards her methods, but says her results speak for themselves.

▲ **Jungle medicine:** the Amazon village where Ruhl says she stayed for two years, learning traditional medicine.

◀ **Playtime:** (above left) children in the Amazon village, where life has not changed in hundreds of years.

Tina, 37



a family.

"It was a real emotional roller-coaster. We tried everything," she says.

In despair and having run out of options, she turned to the self-described natural fertility specialist, Antonia Ruhl.

"It took me a while to pick up the phone, because I was a bit scared

and wasn't too sure at first. But I eventually went in and saw her with my husband," Tsakoumakis says.

"At first I thought, 'What kind of gimmick is this? My husband and I just looked at each other. We weren't too sure.'"

Six weeks later, Tsakoumakis was pregnant.

"Bang, it just happened. I was just blown away. I was really shocked. I thought it was some kind of joke."

Her son, Christopher, was born on July 19.

"He is so handsome. He's absolutely gorgeous," she says.

"After 11 years of trying... it's just a miracle child for us."

"You dig the soil, you put in the fertiliser, you water and plant the seed, and there is no reason it won't grow."

Ruhl says her techniques can be traced to the Kayapo tribe in a remote region of the Amazon.

As a 22-year-old in 1979, she left her home in Rio de Janeiro to live and study under a Kayapo medicine man known as a paje or "dancing feather".

She was given the name White Dove Princess.

Her acceptance, she says, was based on the fact that her great-grandmother was an Amazon Indian and a village medicine woman.

After Ruhl arrived in the Kayapo village, the medicine man told her she was the incarnation of her great-grandmother.

► **When someone walks in and says I haven't had my period for six months or I'm 47 and my doctor says there's no way I can conceive, I'm very confident I can rebalance the body**

"I don't remember being an Indian at all. But he and others in the tribe were convinced."

Ruhl was put through a series of tribal ceremonies, then told she would have to pass a test.

Handed a machete and a melon-like fruit full of water, she was told to follow two guides into the jungle.

They hacked their way through jungle all day. As night fell, her companions suddenly said they were leaving.

"I thought, I'll wait. I was convinced they would come back."

They didn't.

"I was terrified. It was dark, there were all the jungle noises. I began to run and run. I ran for a whole night and a day, crying, cursing, crying."

After tripping and falling down a cliff,