

My IVF Diary

A 60-day journal

(it's long, sorry)

**charting the ins, outs, ups and downs of our
fertility treatment**

About me

I'm 35, married for six years to the funniest, kindest and handsomest man you could meet, and trying very hard to make a baby with him. This diary is an account of the treatment we're currently undergoing, under the care of Dr. Wingfield and the staff of the Merrion Fertility Clinic.

It's personal, it records my responses to the treatment not only physically but also mentally, and includes some notes on the practicalities of undergoing IVF for a couple like us, with busy, active lives, and a sense of humour and a willingness to share our experiences.

Spoiler alert

We have, at the time of writing, not been successful in our efforts to have a baby. But we're still trying really hard.

So far (a potted medical history)

This is a short account of my history of infertility, from diagnosis as a teenager to our present circumstances.

Andrew has no medical issues, apart from the odd sports injury or occasional run-of-the-mill ailments.

Age 16: No periods, diagnosed with PCOS following hospital admission with acute abdominal pain. Referred to a gynaecologist, told to attend GP, lose weight and come back when I want to conceive, as I will likely be infertile. Difficult news for a teenager to come to terms with.

Age 16-26: Regularly attended GP, who prescribed various forms of the contraceptive pill to treat PCOS symptoms, primarily Dianette. The medication kept the PCOS symptoms at bay and gave me a regular cycle, but also resulted in weight gain and depression (undiagnosed).

Age 26-29: Referred to an endocrinologist by GP and prescribed Metformin along with the contraceptive pill, then Metformin and Aldactone instead of the contraceptive pill. No periods, frequent nausea and diarrhoea, very low energy. Stopped Aldactone but continued Metformin when we started trying to conceive. Referred to consultant in National Maternity Hospital.

Age 30-35: Medication free, and trying to conceive. Test results confirm PCOS. Hirsutism significantly more evident on my face, under my chin, on my chest and abdomen since I stopped taking medication, but overall quality of life is much improved. No periods. Advised to lose weight, which I did by taking up sport; running, cycling, weight training.

Provera prescribed to induce bleed prior to ovulation induction. 4 successive cycles of ovulation induction using Clomid with no success; side effects included headaches, mood swings, hot flushes and eczema blisters on my hands and feet. Ovaries responded but uterine lining thin.

1 cycle of ovulation induction using Letrozole with no success; side effects included hair loss and severe depression. Ovaries responded but uterine lining thin.

Surgery to investigate possible septate uterus (negative), perform ovarian diathermy and excise patches of endometriosis (previously undiagnosed). Ovaries did not respond.

6 cycles of ovulation induction using Puregon injections with no success; side effects included headaches and tiredness. Ovaries responded for 5 of the 6 cycles but uterine lining thin. Significant weight gain (10kg) over this period as my fitness suffered due to lack of energy (prior to this I had been running up to half-marathon distance, as well as long-distance cycling).

Rest and re-evaluation, working on fitness and weight loss to prepare for IVF. No medication, but plenty of Folic Acid, Omega 3 and Vitamin C. To drop the last of the weight to meet my 85kg target I cut back on the amount of training that I was doing and stuck to a low-GI diet.

The run up to our 1st IVF cycle

| August | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Puregon | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Orgalutran | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Pregnyl | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Crinone | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

July 29th: 5 days after finishing a 7-day course of Provera, I began to bleed. As luck would have it, my period started on a bank-holiday Friday afternoon, just as I'd finished packing the car for a weekend away. And on our 6th wedding anniversary. You couldn't make it up. I called the clinic and made the appointment for a baseline scan on the Sunday morning, then went to the pharmacy to get the medication I'd need. It's not a nice feeling, coming away from the pharmacy with a carrier bag of the size that shops give you when you buy a new pair of boots.

July 30th: We take a long walk, from Greystones to Bray, climbing over the summit en route. Might as well make the most of the weekend at home!

July 31st: There was no need for Andrew to come to the clinic with me for my baseline scan, so I leave him sleeping in bed and cycle to the clinic. The scan shows that my ovaries are quiet, so the nurse goes over my day-to-day instructions with me to ensure I know what to do.

We spend the afternoon at a family picnic, and talk later about how difficult it can be to manage relationships when you're going through treatment. Who to tell and how much to tell them is a personal call; we've chosen to let our families know what stage we're at but also sometimes feel under pressure to respond to well-meant enquiries after our progress. It's a balancing act, and "we'll let you know when there's anything to know" doesn't always work for us.

Starting IVF medication

August 1st: A little tired today, but not so tired that I don't make the most of the bank holiday Monday; taking a spin class in the morning and spending the afternoon out with friends. After discussing exercise with the nurse during yesterday's scan, I know I will need to scale things back over the coming weeks as I am likely to be tired. Also, she cautions, I need to avoid overheating (spin classes) and impact sports (running) where there might be any danger of torsion; twisting an enlarged ovary. I agree to scale it back.

I decide on 7.30pm as the best time for me to inject (it has to be at the same time every day) and start that evening. It's a much higher dose (125mg) of Puregon than I'd taken before, but the injection is painless and I feel just fine afterwards.

August 2nd: Back in work after the long weekend, and a little tired and nauseous. Not enough to put me off my food entirely, but I certainly enjoy it less. I have a headache by the time I get home that evening, so Andrew and I take to the park on our bikes for some fresh air straight after I inject at 7.30. An hour's cycling and I'm pleasantly tired. I don't sleep too well, however, a bit hot and restless during the night.

August 3rd: Much the same as the day before, in good form but a little low on energy. We decide to book ourselves a holiday in October – about 10 weeks from now – and once the flights are booked I am delighted that we have it to look forward to. Andrew has to run some errands, and I'm content to spend the rest of the evening watching television and catching up on our ironing.

August 4th: Still tired, still in good form, still looking forward immensely to our holiday and glad to have it as a focus. Made plans in work for some meetings that I know I may have to subsequently postpone due to egg collection and, hopefully, embryo transfer, but there seemed no sense in doing so until I know for sure. I'm aware that I'm not performing as well as I could be in work, but my colleagues know that we're undergoing treatment at the moment and are very supportive and understanding.

August 5th: Injected Orgalutran for the first time today, at 7.20am. It comes as a useful pre-loaded syringe, which I appreciate all the more at that early hour. I found injecting into my thigh more uncomfortable than into my stomach, however, and needed to give the needle an unpleasant push to make sure it went all the way in. I broke out in an itchy, nettle-like rash immediately afterwards, as the nurse had cautioned I might, but it had faded within a half hour without any further treatment.

I find myself looking forward to injecting each evening – each day done feels like a small milestone reached. I am glad we're doing this, and grateful that we have the opportunity to. Sure, it's ruinously expensive, but I see it as money well spent, whatever the outcome. We can only be better off than we are – either as prospective parents or as brave loves, secure in the knowledge that we tried our very best.

August 6th: Did not appreciate the 7.20 alarm for my Orgalutran injection on a Saturday morning, but I keep it by the bed and managed to get it done and be back to sleep in minutes. Starting to feel the emotional toll the hormones are taking on my body; we went down to watch the women's Liffey Swim and I bawled crying at the starting line. Feeling wiped tired and laughing now at my earlier disappointment when the nurse initially advised me to scale back my exercise routine.

Visited friends in the evening and had to bring a cooler bag with my Puregon pen with me, felt far less awkward than I would have anywhere else when excusing myself to inject and then asking to store it in their fridge as they've been through treatment themselves (with Clomid, rather than IVF). Exhausted by the time we got home to bed.

An unexpected setback - IVF cancelled

August 7th: 7.20 alarm and injection, followed by a too-brief doze until the 9.20 alarm gets us out of bed for a 10.20 scan appointment. We cycled the 6k there, it helps me to manage my nerves. The scan results were disappointing; just two large follicles, 11mm on the left ovary and 9mm on the right, with plenty of others lagging behind at the 7mm mark. The nurse explained that unless some of the smaller follicles catch up, this will likely result in the cycle being cancelled. Two follicles is not a good enough yield, especially for someone with PCOS, to continue to egg collection. Increasing the dose at this point will not help as it would likely just widen the gap between the growth of the two large ones and the smaller ones. I'm to continue with the current drug regime and come in again for a scan on Wednesday morning, three days hence.

I explain this to Andrew, who has been sitting in the waiting room, over coffee and cake before the cycle home. We are both so bitterly disappointed; we hadn't budgeted for a set-back at this stage, emotionally or financially.

We make the best of the rest of the day, spending an hour on the computer deciding on accommodation for the holiday we have planned in October, then to the gym for a swim. In the evening we have a visit from my parents. Explaining where we are treatment-wise to them is difficult as I am still trying to manage my own disappointment and don't yet feel able to witness theirs. They listen, offer support where I don't feel there's anything they can do, and then we park it and watch the Olympics. Tonight's Puregon injection feels like a waste of time and expensive drugs, but I know that it's too early really for me to say that.

August 8th: I had a bad night's sleep, bed at 11pm but up again at 1.30am to use the bathroom, again at 2.30am to get an ice pack for a swollen midge bite on my thigh and again at 5.30am to use the bathroom. When the alarm goes at 7.20am I consider working from home for the day, but decide to go in. The change of scenery and the company of colleagues will do me no harm.

I spend the day in work feeling flat, tired and disappointed. I'm worried for Andrew as I know he's feeling the same. Determined not to put life on hold, I sign us both up for the Great Dublin Bike Ride in two months' time. I do a lot of cycling, he's a novice (though a very fit one) and the 60k ride will mean light training for me, an achievable challenge for him and (hopefully) a lot of fun to do together.

After work, we decide to take ourselves out for the evening and head to Dollymount for a swim. I pack a cooler bag with my Puregon pen in case we're still out at 7.30pm, and a flask of tea to warm us up after the swim. It turns out that there's a warning in place due to water quality, so we settle for a wade instead of a dip. We head back to the car afterwards so that I can inject, and then walk to Clontarf, pick up some takeaway noodles and have them with our flask of tea in one of the shelters along the North Bull Wall. The evening's like a mini holiday and we both feel great for it.

August 9th: I wake refreshed after sleeping really well. I'm getting the hang of the morning injections. Eggs for breakfast and then off to work, feeling better than I have done for a few days. I'm not looking forward to tomorrow's scan but I have plenty else to look forward to this week: dinner with friends tomorrow evening, a writing workshop on Thursday, a birthday dinner for Andrew's father on Friday and a weekend of good weather, if the forecast is to be believed.

August 10th: The scan confirms that I haven't made much progress over the last three days. The 11mm follicle has increased to 13mm, but the 9mm one has remained at that size, and the smaller ones haven't caught up. My uterine lining is still very thin – a nice triple line as there always is, but too thin. I am more worried about the thin lining than anything else, as it's been a constant throughout the different treatments and something I don't feel there's been enough focus on. I can't seem to find good information on it online, however, so I hope to get a chance to discuss it again with the doctor.

I send Andrew a message to let him know that things are as they were, and that the cycle will likely be cancelled. I hate giving him news like that while he's in work, and at the same time I'd hate to have him waste a day's holidays taking time off for scans like these. Holidays are precious and I'd rather keep them for days when we have the will and energy to make the most of them. I return to work myself and wait for the call from the nurse to tell us what is to happen next. Times like this, I am glad of a private office and understanding colleagues. When one of them drops by later with a Zita West meditation CD for me, I do very well not to cry.

The distraction of the last couple of weeks has meant I'm behind with some writing I was due to submit in advance of a creative workshop. This becomes the focus of my upset and instead of finishing the task, I write a borderline-hysterical email to the tutor, offering IVF as an excuse for not having done my homework. I'm mortified as soon as I hit 'send' – enough so that it prompts me to finish said homework, which I then send on to him as well. The combination of stress and hormones is taking its toll.

The nurse calls after lunch, and it's confirmed that the cycle is to be cancelled. "We can do better" is how she put it, which I thought was both optimistic and kind. The doctor would like me to continue with both the Puregon and Orgalutran for two more days, however, and return for a scan and bloods on Friday morning. This will give her more scope to learn about how I'm responding to the drugs, and inform what we try next. I'm happy to do it.

Injecting this evening, however, feels pointless. We're calling to friends for dinner and I consider injecting early – a half hour before we leave – rather than packing the pen, storing it in their fridge

and going through the rigmarole of explaining myself to them. "If I'm just a science guinea pig anyway..." I say to Andrew, but then decide that if I'm going to do it then I might as well do it right. So I bring it along and for the second time this week, inject in someone else's bathroom.

August 11th: Alarm, Orgalutran, snooze. I won't miss this routine. I don't break out in a rash after the Orgalutran anymore, which is progress of a sort.

The day passes happily enough, and on my cycle home I twice run into friends who are both undergoing fertility treatment themselves at the moment. The first one immediately asks if I'm allowed to be on my bike (I am!) and expresses a worry that I'd be knocked off it. It goes to show the different attitudes we have to the process; she's been advised that she'll need to take the two weeks off following embryo transfer (though she hasn't started the stimulation process yet) and wouldn't risk being out in traffic, whereas I am determined to keep everything else in my life as close to normal as possible. I'm going to work, I'm exercising (some, anyway), I'm socialising, and Andrew and I have planned a holiday in October. Life is ticking along. We've been at this for over six years now and for us, that's too long to live in two-week increments.

The second friend I meet has just suffered a second miscarriage, both occurring after successful IVF treatments, and I have a brief, raw conversation with her and her love at the side of the road. Their story is a stark reminder that no matter how far along in the process you get, you need to prepare yourself for and be willing to accept crushing disappointment. They're a couple who have particularly inspired me with their pragmatism and their loss affects me greatly.

I am very conscious, as I talk to them, to take care not to say the wrong thing, not to compare experience (my own or that of others) and not to counter with stories of miracle babies. I know how hard it is to tell someone of your pain and I am learning too how hard it is to just listen to someone's story and acknowledge their grief. I tell them how they've inspired me and thank them for that. When we talked about it some time ago, they had told me that they thought of themselves as lucky either way, and that whatever happened, they'd be no worse off for trying. I hold that thought very dear.

Injecting this evening is done in a bathroom of the National Museum at Collins' Barracks, after sitting watching the clock for the previous twenty minutes. I've excused myself for a moment from a workshop, having explained to the group that I need to take some medication at 7.30pm on the dot. My tutor handles it with humour and grace. I am grateful to him for putting me at my ease.

Making the best of things - IVF converted to ovulation induction

August 12th: Alarm, final dose of Orgalutran, snooze. I arrive at the clinic for a 9.20 appointment and have bloods taken to measure my estradiol levels and a scan to check on any progress with my ovaries. Not much going on there, the dominant follicle is now 14mm and the rest are still lagging behind. My uterine lining is still thin at 4.2mm. I take the slow route back to the office on my bike, and stop to sit in the sun by the seafront in Clontarf for a few minutes.

The nurse calls after lunch to advise that while we definitely won't be proceeding to egg collection, the doctor wants me to continue with the drugs for three more days, to mature the follicle and monitor the progress of my uterine lining. So much for celebrating the final dose of Orgalutran! I've run out, so a script will be faxed to the pharmacy and Andrew will collect it on his way home from work. The plan is that we "try at home" (happy to!) instead of going for IVF this time around, consult with the doctor again on the 25th of August and then start again (assuming that the trying at home doesn't result in a pregnancy) with a different drug regime and hopefully a better response. I feel more encouraged than I have done over the last few days. I have no real reason to – nothing's changed – but that's how it goes, ups and downs, swings and roundabouts. I plan to enjoy the weekend.

August 13th: Alarm, Orgalutran, snooze. If this reads like Groundhog Day, then you're getting an idea of how it feels. Andrew is busy for the day so I spend the best part of mine visiting my grandmother, along with my sister. My nana asks how treatment is going, she's aware of it being an ongoing feature of life for Andrew and I over the past few years. I don't mind her asking, because she always continues the conversation by telling me that kids aren't all they're cracked up to be, and that life will be fulfilling either way. One of her brothers lived a long, adventurous and happy life with his amazing wife and no children, and she sometimes envied them.

I spent a few hours on the couch in the evening, overcome by tiredness. This has been a pattern over the last few days, between 6-8pm I'm wrecked and good for nothing, but I usually perk up a bit. Hard to know whether exercise helps or not with this. Having something good to watch does, for sure, as I'm not great at just sitting down and doing nothing otherwise. So I'm making my way through crime dramas like I'm studying to be a detective.

August 14th: We head up to the park after breakfast to cheer on the Ironman competitors. I'd love to compete in it someday... But definitely not today. Still very tired, and with a dry mouth (for the last two days, now that I think of it) no matter how much water I drink. We walk for about an hour, head home for lunch and to watch the women's marathon in the Olympics (Someday I might fulfil a life's ambition and run the Dublin one).

Today's bout of unreasonable tiredness hits as we're making our way around a DIY superstore, pricing tiles and laminate floors. I get teary-eyed because they don't have what we want in stock (even though we had no plans to buy it today). Andrew stops in the middle of the shop, give me a big hug until I feel okay again, and makes it all better. Like magic. We stop off in Waterstown Park on our way home for a walk. We've never been before and have great fun exploring it, climbing through the undergrowth to look up at the Silver Bridge which spans the Liffey. I've written a lot in this diary about getting out and about, because it's what's keeping us well through all of this. We get home just in time for me to inject my daily dose of Puregon, hopefully the last one for this cycle, and we both sleep soundly that night.

August 15th: Alarm, Orgalutran, OUCH! I don't know what I did wrong this morning, but I managed to hurt myself, drawing blood and leaving a bruise. Off to the clinic for a scan and bloods at 9.20. It shows nothing new; one mature follicle at 18mm on the left ovary and loads of smaller ones, each around the 10mm mark, covering both left and right. A lovely triple line showing in my uterus, but still thin at 5.2mm. The nurse today seems relieved when I mention that I'd already been told we wouldn't be going to egg collection – something I'd have thought was in my records but she must have thought she'd need to be the one to tell me.

She asked how we're coping and I tell her fine, now, but that last week was difficult, when we were told that the cycle would be cancelled. "We'll definitely get there" she said, and I should have felt encouraged, but that she'd said the same thing this time last year during an ovulation induction cycle. She means well, but I would prefer that she hadn't said it at all. Coming from a nurse, it gave me false hope the first time. I remember another conversation with the consultant, last year, where she expressed the hope that 2016 would be 'our year'. "We'll have to call it Pádraig Pearse, so" I said. Which sounded funnier in my head than it did out loud.

The afternoon call from the nurse confirms that I'm finally to stop with the Orgalutran and Puregon injections for this cycle. Instead I'm to trigger ovulation with a Pregnyl injection tonight (it's been a while, I might have to look up the video on the website to make sure I'm doing it correctly), followed by a supporting shot of it on Thursday and again on Saturday. Plenty of sex in the meantime, and then Crinone gel every night from next Monday, until I test on the 31st.

We have a provisional appointment with the consultant for the 25th – the nurse is to check whether or not that stands, given that we won't have a test result by then. I am inclined to keep it, as I am

not hopeful we'll conceive on this cycle. The nurse says no, that we have every chance but, having been in this situation literally ten times already, I don't share her optimism. I'm glad to have the break from the drugs, however, or at least some of the drugs (a change is as good as a rest!) and hope that my energy levels pick up.

The interminable two-week wait

August 16th: I'm enjoying the break from injections today. Still tired and thirsty, though we went for a good hour-long cycle around the park yesterday evening, so I'd be tired and thirsty anyway. Feeling a bit more focused in work than I have done for the past few weeks.

A call from the clinic confirms that our consultant appointment is to be pushed back to the 1st of Sept., so that we'll have a test result for the team to review before we see the doctor. I'm glad that she has an available appointment, I was worried that we'd have to wait. Sometimes what's hard about the whole process is how long everything seems to take. Two-week waits feel like lifetimes, the opposite of a two-week holiday.

August 17th: Another drug-free day. I was exhausted getting out of bed this morning but my energy levels have improved as the day's gone on. I made a promise to myself today that I would not google anything at all about PCOS, IVF, etc. and made it all the way to 4pm. This is exactly how I do not want to kill time between now and when I test on the 31st.

August 18th: Not a great night's sleep, awake since 5.30am with lower back pain and general crankiness. Some abdominal pain this morning, and the thrush-like discomfort that I seem to get with every cycle of ovulation induction. I've used some of the mild Canestan cream to treat it, it seems to help. I'm otherwise in good form, though concerned for Andrew as he was having a low day yesterday and seeing him sad or anxious stresses me out and leaves me feeling guilty. I find the feeling of guilt around my infertility the most difficult to deal with and I've had quite a bit of counselling over the last two years that has helped me, but I think it will always be something I'll have to manage.

The weather picked up this evening, so we headed to the park on our bikes, which always puts me in a good mood. I made a mess preparing my Pregnyl injection, snapping the glass tops on the vials is tricky and by 10pm when I sat down to do it, I was very tired. I managed to get it done after dropping broken glass on the floor and spraying the excess liquid from the syringe (a smaller dose as it's a support injection rather than a trigger) all over the kitchen table. I took an antihistamine before bed to calm some midge bites on my torso, and slept like the dead.

August 19th: I woke up feeling like I'd been hit by a truck thanks to last night's antihistamine, but as the morning's gone on I'm feeling the benefits of a good night's sleep.

I read with interest the latest email from the Genesis Research Trust, a charity that funds research into fertility treatments, chaired by Professor Robert Winston. The email tells the story of a couple fundraising for the charity by embarking on a 107-mile cycle (goals!) and their struggles with infertility, PCOS, failed OI, IVF cycles and recurrent miscarriage. People never cease to amaze me with their strength of character and true grit.

One of the services offered by the charity is Ask Robert Winston, where you can email the Professor for advice about your own circumstances. The emails are then stripped of anything that might identify you and published on the Trust's website, and they contain a wealth of information. I wrote to Professor Winston myself a couple of years ago for advice on my own treatment, and at the time he recommended ovulation induction with FSH as the logical next step (you can read our correspondence on the Trust's website: <https://www.genesisresearchtrust.com/ivf-and-other-answers/pcos-and-septate-uterus>).

It was in keeping with my consultant's recommendation and my subsequent treatment, but perhaps even more useful as an exercise in that it helped me to feel listened to and to hope that my experience (and his advice) might ultimately help someone else. Never let a good crisis go to waste, as Mr. Churchill said. That is, in part what this journal is for. It's also to give me something to do and keep me sane.

August 20th: A lazy day after a late night – a BBQ with my colleagues and their significant others. I stuck to a single glass of wine at the start of the night but these days I drink very little anyway, never more than three drinks and even that would be a rare occurrence. My tolerance for booze is low, and my tolerance for hangovers lower again. They leave me feeling vulnerable and depressed and it no longer seems worth it. I'm mindful of my caffeine and sugar intake too, as too much of either will leave me feeling stressed or upset.

Andrew is busy for much of the day so I potter around the house and then meet him at the pool for a swim. His back is giving him trouble, he hurt it lifting weights and the cycling and a game of football yesterday seem to have made it worse. He's also very stressed and tense. I'm hoping a swim will help him but when I get into the pool, my face burns with the chlorine. I'd used a depilatory cream this morning to remove the dark, wiry hair that grows on my lip, chin, along my jawline and particularly under my chin. I usually do this about once a week. There's too much to pluck, and waxing leaves me with a rash that can last for days, so I've become a dab hand with the cream, so much so that I'd forgotten that I'd done it that morning (I know better than to swim on the same day). So the swim was short-lived, and we went for dinner instead.

Last injection of Pregnyl – last injection of any kind for this cycle. Once again, I make a mess of breaking the glass vial with the powder in it and send tiny shards all over the kitchen table. Thankfully I manage not to spill any of the medication and the injection is quick and almost painless.

August 21st: A drug-free day, and a busy one for a Sunday as I have to work in the afternoon and we're going to a gig tonight. We take it easy for the morning though, and catch up on last night's Olympic athletics while we eat breakfast.

I realise I haven't mentioned sex at all in this journal, and it must seem conspicuous by its absence. I hadn't thought to mention it because happily for us both, we have a great sex life together. We have sex most days, whether we're undergoing treatment or not, and we always have. I don't use the TTC forum euphemisms BD ('baby dance') or DTD ('doing the deed') because they make sex sound like work to me. When this IVF cycle was cancelled, I embraced the chance for us to have unprotected sex again as a silver lining. I'd love to think that we could make a life by making love, rather than having someone do it for us in a lab. But it's an unrealistic and overly-romantic ideal, and I'm sure that if we were to conceive I wouldn't ultimately mind where or how it happened. You take these silver linings, all the same.

Andrew is still very stressed out and sore and I am reluctant to leave him for the afternoon. He's not in great form by the time I get home, he's been out to lunch with his family and the sitting around has left him in a lot of pain. But he takes some painkillers, we go out to the gig, and it does is the world of good (even though we both leave it a little deaf).

August 22nd: An unremarkable day in work, followed by an hour's swimming (more than I've had the energy for in a while) and then a roast chicken dinner at home. I managed to get some new curtain rails up in the kitchen and felt very happy with myself; the rails have been sitting on the table along with the drill and the new curtains for the last week, and I haven't had the focus to just get them up. It's the small victories.

First dose of Crinone tonight, which I wasn't looking forward to (why would I) but it was fine. Not messy or irritating like I'd feared. I have, of course, googled all the side effects – not just the ones

they tell you about in the literature but the ones that other women tell each other about on the forums, the really messy stuff – so we'll see how it goes. Forewarned is forearmed and all that.

Andrew is still out of sorts with a sore back, but he's booked a massage for tomorrow afternoon which I'm hoping will help a lot.

Spoke briefly to my mam on the phone this evening to arrange a dinner for tomorrow night but she has a heavy cold, picked up from my young nieces, so I've asked if we can postpone the visit as I just don't want to risk getting ill at the moment. I feel terrible about it, but she's very understanding.

August 23rd: Felt a bit cranky and out of sorts today, but who wouldn't after 26 days of this and counting. Another 7 days before I can test, though I fully expect to bleed before then, as I have on all ten cycles of ovulation induction we've done up to now.

I say 'bleed' rather than 'get my period' because, not having a natural cycle, when I do bleed I never feel it's 'my' anything. It's almost always drug-induced, be that with the pill, Provera or following ovulation induction.

I have sore breasts, "not caught-in-a-door sore" I explain to Andrew, "but sore like someone stood on them yesterday". I have a real way with words sometimes. He had someone stand on him today as part of a Thai massage, which both amused him and eased the pain in his back.

August 24th: I start the day surreptitiously googling 'sex while using Crinone gel' as it's not mentioned anywhere on the accompanying leaflet. Maybe they assume you won't want to? It's enough that I'm cranky and have sore breasts, I don't want Andrew's hormones knocked out of whack as a result of any gel transfer. I don't find anything authoritative, just forums where the women say that they either weren't in the mood or that they tried it once and ended up feeling like they had thrush afterwards. Most of the chat is about how it can form a semi-solid wet-tissue-like lump inside you that you'll need to fish out at some stage. I can't wait.

In the evening I head to the park for a cycle with a friend. The weather was beautiful and we managed 27k as the sun went down. I was very sore, though, despite wearing padded shorts and using chamois cream. The Crinone gel is irritating me, I think, or I may have thrush. I use the mild Canestan cream again, as well as some Savlon, and spent the evening moaning about it.

August 25th: The combination of Canestan and Savlon seems to have worked and I'm feeling fine again this morning, but I suspect this irritation might become a theme. I've got discharge the colour and consistency of cottage cheese, which I think is the remains of the Crinone that hasn't been absorbed. If (when) this cycle fails, the too-thin silver lining will be not having to continue with this drug.

I start my working day surreptitiously browsing dogs for adoption on the DSPCA website. We have two cats, but would love a dog (or two) to join our family too. It's a terrible cliché – a couple trying to conceive who instead assemble a menagerie of pets – and we won't take in a dog until we're confident we can give it a great home. Things are too up-in-the-air at the moment. Our cats, in the meantime, live like princes.

August 26th: We had a late night last night and are both feeling the worse for wear this morning. We were out 'til well past midnight at a charity concert, I had two drinks and a great time watching Andrew on stage, singing his heart out. He and his colleagues worked hard to stage the show and collect funds for girls' education in Pakistan, and I'm so proud.

I spend the day in work spring-cleaning our storerooms, which feels like getting somewhere. The cleaner laughs at me pulling the place apart and asks if I'm premenstrual; I concede that I probably am. My hands, feet and forehead have broken out in eczema blisters; I have raised and itchy welts

on my knuckles, along the sides of my index and middle fingers, on the knuckles of my toes. This has happened after each round of ovulation induction, usually right before I get a bleed, and it subsides once it arrives, with the blisters cracking and peeling. Lovely!

I decide that Andrew and I should go away for the weekend so that I don't spend Saturday and Sunday spring-cleaning our house and wringing my swollen hands.

August 27th: Not a great night's sleep. I'm having a lot of nightmares this week, another thing I'm going to lay at Crinone's door. We head for Wexford after breakfast, stopping in Enniscorthy for lunch and a walk up Vinegar Hill. I have to make a dash back to the town and find a café, though, as I get sudden cramps and have what we'll call a 'toilet emergency'. I make it to a bathroom and feel much better afterwards, but it's upsetting, and it takes me back to all those years I spent taking Metformin and feeling sick all the time. I still have an encyclopaedic knowledge of Dublin's public conveniences.

August 28th: More nightmares, still blistered, still moody, breasts are still sore. I'm a joy to be around at the moment. Andrew insists that I am and he really means it, but I am pretty tired of myself.

We visit Tintern Abbey for the afternoon and take a tour. It's a beautiful day and being out in the world with Andrew makes me feel better, as it always does. The weekend away has been too short, we'd love to stay another night (or a week) but we get back in the car and head for home, with a stop off to visit Andrew's parents on the way.

Before I go to bed, I decide to take a pregnancy test. I've no reason to, I'm not due to test until Wednesday, but my tired logic sees it as a win-win; either it'll be positive and we'll start the week on a high, or it'll be negative and I'll text again on Wednesday with tempered expectations. It's negative. I don't even bother mentioning it to Andrew. I am still fully expecting to get a bleed between now and Wednesday morning, as happened with the previous ten rounds of ovulation induction.

August 29th: My breasts are so tender and sore today that I wish I'd worn a sports bra on the cycle to work. Still no sign of a bleed and at this stage I wish it would just hurry up. I don't think I've ever made it as far as test day (still two days away) without a bleed on any of the previous ten ovulation induction cycles and I don't want to get my hopes up for this one.

It's a beautiful day, so I decide to take some of the time in lieu I'm due from work in the afternoon, and spend it in the garden with Andrew. He reads and I weed the paths, he makes fun of my apparent inability to sit still. I am a bit agitated at the moment, and the work helps to keep me calm.

That evening we visit friends for dinner. They're due to start IVF themselves over the coming months, and we talk a bit about our experience so far. I try to keep it to a minimum as I know Andrew finds it stressful; the repetitive nature of the conversation (everyone asks how it's going and though the conversation might be new to them, we've had it many times over) and, for him, hearing me describe to other people what it's like physically to be on the medication is distressing. Talking about it later, I tell him that I try to see this as one of the positive things we can take from our experience – being able to help others by talking about it. It's not always easy, though.

August 30th: A long day in the car today, driving from Dublin to Connemara and back for work. Still feeling out of sorts due to the Crinone, with blisters on my hands that flare up in the heat of the car (another glorious day), sore breasts and a nagging headache. The cottage-cheese discharge from the Crinone has changed in texture and now the leftover gel has hardened into lumps, like the wet tissue described by other women in the online forums. It makes sex uncomfortable. It makes riding my bike uncomfortable. It makes everything uncomfortable.

We spend the evening celebrating my nana's 85th birthday with my family. It's nice, and it keeps my mind off the pregnancy test I'm due to take tomorrow morning.

A negative result and an optimistic review

August 31st: I wake at 5am needing the bathroom, and decide to take the test then. It's negative, as I knew it would be. I don't sleep again after that. I'm not upset, exactly, because I wasn't expecting any different, but I'm sad and disappointed. I snuggle up to Andrew and after the alarm goes, I tell him that it was negative and we make the most of our usual morning routine, breakfast and music. We have plans for the evening, dinner with a friend and then a film, which is good.

I've missed a call from the clinic on my way to work. One of the nurses, calling to see if I have an outcome (i.e. a pregnancy test result) so that it can be discussed at the lunchtime meeting in advance of my appointment with the consultant tomorrow. I call her back and tell her about the negative test, confirm that I can stop using the Crinone and am advised to take another test tomorrow morning before the consultation. I know that this is just belt-and-braces good sense, but bruised as I am by hormones and disappointment, I feel aggrieved at the suggestion that there is still any hope for us at the end of this cycle.

The evening is pleasant, dinner is good and the film (an extended version of a classic, on re-release in our local cinema) is fun, though I nod off for a few minutes somewhere in the middle of all the action. I sleep well, and dream of slaying monsters with Andrew and the cats by my side.

Sept. 1st: I do another test (negative) and then Andrew and I walk to the clinic, a good 50-minute stroll, for our review with the consultant. She's kind and sympathetic, says we've been very unlucky. The team have reviewed our case and are recommending we try IVF again, starting with a higher dose (200 instead of 125) and trying Gonal-F instead of Puregon. It's the same drug, the consultant explains, but from a different manufacturer. Anything's worth a shot.

She cautions that we might well be facing another cancellation if I'm not responding (or if I over-respond), that I am at risk of OHSS, and that there's a fair chance that if we get as far as egg retrieval and fertilisation, we might be looking at a 'freeze all' rather than a fresh embryo transfer. This could be due to OHSS or a thin endometrium, but we won't know until we try. We talk some more about my concerns re the thin endometrium and she reassures us that should it get to 6mm they'd be happy to proceed, something I've managed on a few occasions. If not, it's something we'll look at before transferring a frozen embryo.

As I haven't had a bleed yet, she asks that I come back for a scan on Tuesday (Sept. 6th) if it still hasn't arrived. Should it arrive in the meantime (fingers crossed) I can go in for a baseline scan and get started on the new cycle straight away. I'm happy about this; if I were to get my wish, all will go to plan and I'll spend at least a week of the two-week wait sunning myself on a beach in southern Portugal. We'll see.

Andrew and I head off for breakfast and to digest the conversation with the consultant. I'm anxious that he understand the ins-and-outs of our treatment plan, conscious that he spends less time googling it than I do. We're both in good form. Tired, but with enough in us to look forward to the opportunity to try again.

I decide to take a spin class that evening, for the first time since August 1st (when I started on IVF meds). I enjoy it and feel reassured that I haven't lost all my fitness in the last month, but later am so tired that I'm cold and shivery. I put it down to overdoing it, and resign myself to taking it very easy until all of this is done.

Sept. 2nd: I spend the day impatiently waiting for a bleed. I am sore and unfocused, I end up having to stay late in work to finish a presentation I'm due to deliver tomorrow. I have the evening to myself at home

as Andrew is out with colleagues, and when he gets in I fall asleep on his lap in front of the television.

Sept. 3rd: Breakfast with friends in a local café, where I promptly begin to bleed ten minutes before I'm due to head to work to make a presentation for my board of directors. I stop off at a pharmacy on my way to pick up some painkillers, which is just as well. I'm very glad of them over the next few hours. I call the clinic and arrange to come in for a baseline scan on Monday morning.

Once work is done, I take it easy for the rest of the day, running a few errands and pottering around the house. I'm tired and sore, but feeling much better than I had done before the bleed started.

Sept. 4th: Still in a good deal of pain and bleeding more than I normally would, which I assume is due to the Crinone. Andrew and I head out for a cycle, 4.2k around the park, and the exercise helps with the cramps. Still hoping to do the 6.0k race with him next weekend – a short one for me but it will be his first, and I'm very excited about doing it together.

Off to visit my family then for the afternoon, to celebrate my father's birthday. My parents are anxious to know how treatment is going for us, i.e. are we managing okay, financially and emotionally. We don't talk about it often and I find it difficult when we do, but I explain to my mam where we're at. She gets upset, I get upset, she tells me that it will work and I tell her that I think it won't, and that it makes it impossible for me to go through the treatment if I get it into my head that it will be successful. I can put in the hard work but I have to practice pragmatic pessimism. Allowing my hopes to get too high, as I have done in the past, is too hard.

Here we go again - 2nd IVF cycle

| Sept. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Gonal F | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Orgalutran | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Buserelin | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Sept. 5th: Back in for what I had assumed would be a routine baseline scan, but it shows that I have a cyst on my right ovary, measuring 20mm. The nurse advises that this will likely mean that I won't be able to commence treatment this cycle, that we'll have to wait. She says that my options will likely be to go on the pill in order to reduce it, as I don't have a natural cycle, or to have it drained, which she thinks would be a drastic approach. I'm up for discussion again at their lunchtime meeting, and return to work to await a call.

I'm devastated. It's not big news, cysts happen all the time and usually resolve themselves, but I just feel like I can't catch a break. I send Andrew a text to let him know that though we mightn't be starting treatment yet, there's nothing to worry about and to keep his appointment for bloods in the afternoon. I don't want to let on to him until we're face-to-face how upset I am.

I get the call back from the nurse during a meeting and excuse myself to take it. It's good news – the team have decided that because the cyst is borderline in terms of its size and my estradiol levels are low, they're happy for us to proceed. I'm delighted. I meet Andrew in town after work and head to the pharmacy to pick up the new drugs. It's funny, we're no better off than we were yesterday, but I'm feeling better about things after the threat that even the chance to try would be taken away from us, or at least postponed.

I take the first shot of Gonal F at 19.30, and set a daily alarm to remind me. The pen is different to the Puregon one, but just as easy to use. I feel fine, and get a good night's sleep.

Sept. 6th: I don't know if it's the change of drug or the significantly higher dose, but I think the next few weeks might be tough. I'm out of sorts already, tired, blisters on my hands, headache, swollen and

sensitive gums. Even the skin on my face feels sore, like it would if I was very dehydrated. I'm making sure to drink lots of water.

The news this afternoon is of a fatal accident on the road I cycle from the clinic to my office after every appointment. A cyclist, a woman in her 30s, has been killed in a collision with a truck. I know the corner well, I know how people drive there and the scant heed they pay to those of us on bikes. I'm so upset. Andrew offers to come and pick me up instead of me having to cycle home, but I insist that I'll be okay. I spend the ride home wondering if drivers are paying any more attention in light of the woman's death. If they are, it's hard to see it.

I meet Andrew at the gym, and swim 40 lengths of the pool. It's nice, tiring but relaxing. We get home just as my alarm rings to inject. He makes dinner for us, and we watch a film together on the couch, though I nod off again. So very tired.

Sept. 7th: Wrecked again today, and I have a blistering headache from the minute I wake. It eases some after breakfast, and then comes and goes throughout the day in work. I'll take it easy this evening. I've a long day of meetings ahead of me tomorrow, followed by a dinner with colleagues. It'll take a bit of planning to bring along the Gonal F pen in a cooler bag and excuse myself to inject.

I don't get a great night's sleep, a bit restless and I've to get up twice to wee. I've been drinking lots of water to try to ease the headaches, it helps but this disturbed sleep is the downside.

Sept. 8th: A very long day in work. I'm still very tired and it's making me cranky. My hands are still blistered, I've a big spot on my chin and my gums are still swollen, so I'm not feeling great about myself. I cycle into town after work to the restaurant where we're meeting for dinner, and get completely drowned on the way. I spend the meal sitting in a literal puddle, but feel better after good food, a glass of wine and easy, non-work-related conversation with my colleagues.

I scuttle off to the restaurant's bathroom with my cooler bag of drugs at 7.30pm on the dot, and inject 100 IU of Gonal F – the pens come preloaded with 900 IU so I have a second pen with me to complete the dose. I've miscounted, though, I had calculated it as three and a half doses per pen when, obviously, it's four and a half 200 IU doses. I fit another needle and inject another 100 IU from the same pen, annoyed with myself over the mistake. It's just tiredness. By the time I get home I'm fit for nothing much and fall asleep on Andrew's lap on the couch after a good half-hour's grumbling about my day. Lucky him!

Sept. 9th: First dose of Orgalutran this morning at 7.20, after a terrible night's sleep (thanks mostly to the cat). It's fine. I won't appreciate the early alarm tomorrow morning (a Saturday). I'm very tired in work and decide to take a few hours of the time in lieu owed to me in the afternoon, leaving at 3 instead of 5. I'm not as distracted as I was during the last round of IVF drugs, but I do feel more tired and there's not much point in my being in work if I'm not on the ball enough to get work done.

Andrew is home for the afternoon and is planning a trip to the gym, so I decide to go along to the pool and to bring a book to read on the loungers. I swim 20 lengths, then take it easy, but leave myself short on time and have to hurry home to inject. I'm 5 minutes late and upset about it but again, it's just tiredness that has me feeling incompetent.

Sept. 10th: 7.20 alarm, Orgalutran, snooze. We have a leisurely morning and decide to go out for the afternoon, take a little holiday. We get the train to Howth and have lunch at the market, then take a boat trip around Ireland's Eye. I'm tired by the time we get home, and apprehensive about the day ahead of us tomorrow, but the lovely day today has helped to put me at ease.

I inject the Gonal F as usual, complaining to Andrew about how the medicine smells, something I never noticed with Puregon but I find unpleasant about Gonal F. I can even smell it from my skin

after I've used it. My skin is quite sensitive at the moment and I'm a bit sun and wind-burned after the day.

Sept. 11th: 7.20 alarm, Orgalutran, up and at 'em. Early start to the day as Andrew is heading off on the 60km Great Dublin Bike Ride at 8.30, his first *sportif*. I'm upset not to be riding it along with him (because of a 10am appointment for a scan – non-negotiable and I did try) and have a little cry about it over breakfast. It's not a big deal, there'll be plenty of other opportunities, but 6 weeks of medication, appointments and low energy impacting on how fully I can participate in things is wearing me down a bit.

After waving Andrew off at the start line, I decide that instead of limiting my morning to keeping my scan appointment, I'll make something of it. I cycle on to the docklands and spend some time in the sun taking photos of the new buildings, the street art and the dragon boats racing up and down the canal basin. After the scan I visit Merrion Square, then a café on Grand Canal Street, then back across town to sit in the Blessington Street Basin park for a while with my book. Sunday morning is reclaimed.

I was very worried that the scan would show little progress, or just one or two dominant follicles, like last time. But no, this time there are more than 20 follicles across both ovaries, the largest measuring at 11mm. I'm so relieved. The cyst has resolved itself. I went in fully expecting to have another cycle cancelled, so I leave on a high. It's not much, but it's better news than we've had a any stage thus far. Andrew calls me from his first rest stop, 28km under his belt, and I tell him the good news and then cry again before I pick up my bike and head out on my own adventure.

He finishes the Bike Ride in style, and after some time relaxing at home we go to the supermarket to get the makings of a roast dinner. Halfway around, I'm hit by a wave of tiredness. I end up spending the rest of the evening on the couch, ordering a takeaway curry for dinner because we're both too tired to cook. An early night, and a good sleep despite waking a few times with the heat.

Sept. 12th: A very Monday morning in work – there's an alarm going off for the first two hours, giving my colleagues a headache to match mine. I'm very tired today, so much so that I drop my lunch all over the kitchen floor, then unspool a whole roll of kitchen towel when I go to clean it up. I leave work at 4pm instead of 5pm and plan to do this for the rest of the week, or as needs be. I'm trying to strike a balance between getting as much done in work as I can so that I'm not under pressure, and not wearing myself out.

The blisters on my hands have gone down and my gums are feeling better as my body adjusts to the medication. I pack the Gonal F pen and some antiseptic wipes into a little cooler bag, shove it into my handbag and we go to see an early film in the local cinema. I decide to inject in my seat rather than disturb everyone an hour into the film, and it's fine. I fiddle a bit to get the dose right in the low light but I get it done with the minimum of fuss. The film is great, one of those that makes you feel better about the world and the people who live in it.

Sept 13th: I think this might be my last day on my bike for this cycle – I really felt every one of the bumps in the road on the way to work this morning. My abdomen feels very bloated and tender. I'm dreading having to find another way to get around. I don't like to drive when I'm tired as it feels irresponsible, and there are no direct bus routes from home either to the clinic, where I have a scan appointment in the morning, or to work. But I'll figure something out. No point risking a twisted ovary for pride and convenience's sake.

After dinner we decide to go out – the theatre fringe festival is running so we walk into town and catch a play. It's great, it takes our minds off everything we have going on. By the time we get home, I'm ready for bed. Andrew is not, quite, and is feeling quite stressed and uptight. I feel very sorry for him and wish I could make it all better.

Sept 14th:

I forgot my Orgalutran injection when the alarm went off, and sprung out of bed ten minutes later. I'm surprised it doesn't happen more often. After waving Andrew off to work, I drive to the clinic for my scan. The drive takes ages compared to the spin on the bike, but I know I've made the right decision. I'm so tender that I feel like I need two sports bras, one for my breasts and the other for my poor ovaries.

The scan shows that I have 45 follicles across the two ovaries, 18 of which are measuring over 11mm (the largest measures 15mm). So, great progress but high risk of OHSS and definitely over the threshold at which a freeze-all is recommended, rather than a fresh transfer. Which is okay. Disappointing, especially given that my womb lining has thickened to what, for me, is a whopping 7.2mm (best ever). It seems a shame that I won't get to put it to use, but the consequences of proceeding and risking severe OHSS are not worth it.

I talk through what symptoms I need to watch out for with the nurse and am reassured that I'm doing just fine. Two hours later, sitting at my desk in work, I feel far less fine and am worried because of the pains in my abdomen that something is up. But it subsides. It was the same yesterday. I'll just keep drinking lots of water and hope for the best. I'm thirsty all the time anyway.

I get a call from the nurse after lunch to confirm what she'd advised in the morning. I'm to come back in two days' time for a scan, and will likely be in for egg retrieval in five days' time (on Monday). I let Andrew know, so that he can arrange time off work. It can be difficult for him to get time off as a teacher. I'm very lucky that I can come and go from work as I need to. I tell him that I'm very proud of my womb lining, because saying so makes me laugh. Hopefully it made him laugh too.

I get a call from one of the clinic's doctors in the afternoon to tell me that the results of my Prolactin test have come back, and that they're measuring high, but only just outside the normal range. She reassures me that this won't impact on this cycle or have an effect on a pregnancy resulting from it, it's just that they will need to test again. They'll wait, though, as it's too early to repeat the test just yet.

After work we decide to go to the park, it's a lovely evening and we want to make the most of the sunshine. I bring a book and sit reading on a bench as Andrew goes for a run. Not being able to run at the moment really bothers me (or cycle, or do weights training, or anything much else) but I need to get past it.

By 10pm I'm ready for bed, though Andrew is not. Usually I'd nap on his shoulder on the couch instead of going to bed without him, but I'm too uncomfortable. The nurse this morning advised against having sex until after egg retrieval because of the size of my ovaries, and though I'm disappointed, I agree.

Sept. 15th:

Slept well but woke up sore, my breasts and particularly my ovaries. It feels somewhere between muscle cramp and trapped wind, and is worse when I move to sit down or bend over. It's manageable though (I am determined that it will be and that this cycle won't be cancelled) and I take the car to work again, intending to put in as full a day there as I can manage.

Spent the three o' clock slump in work reading horror stories about egg retrieval and recovery on various blogs and fertility forums. Can't wait for next week... I've scheduled one day off, the day of the procedure, and warned my colleagues that I may need more.

Sept. 16th:

Last shot of Orgalutran this morning, then in to the clinic for a scan. I have more than fifty follicles at this stage, and more than thirty of them that are measuring as large enough to potentially contain mature eggs. No wonder I feel so rotund! The nurse advises me to take it very easy over the weekend and not to do a full day in work today. I'm given a prescription for Buserelin, which I'll use as a trigger instead of Pregnyl. It's given when the cycle is to be a freeze-all, and helps to reduce the

risk of OHSS. I ask again about how long I'll need to plan for in terms of recovery, and the nurse advises me to book two days off.

I then spend almost three quarters of an hour hanging around the corridors of the National Maternity Hospital, waiting for the pharmacists to return from their break so that I can get the prescription for Buserelin filled. A woman I met in the waiting room of the clinic is also hanging around waiting, and we eventually get chatting, acknowledging our common purpose and wishing one another luck. It makes me feel less alone. The NMH is not a good place to be hanging around when you're heavy with eggs and hormones.

It's Culture Night, which would normally see Andrew and I gallivanting all over the city, but I'm not up to it. We walk as far as the underwhelming street entertainment in Smithfield, then retreat to a new pub on the quays where we're the only patrons. I have a glass of stout, then we head to the cinema. There'll be other culture nights.

Sept 17th: How nice to sleep on this morning, and not have to inject. My parents come to visit in the afternoon and we walk down to Smithfield, where there's another festival on. This one's much livelier, there's music and dancing and food and it's really lovely.

We visit my dad's family in the evening and I have Andrew set an alarm for my Buserelin injection, which I need to administer at exactly a quarter past nine. I end up having to leave the table almost mid-sentence, which must have looked a little odd, and I have to inject myself in the front room, because someone is using the bathroom. I inject in the dark, because in my fluster I can't figure out how to operate the blinds to cover the window, and putting the lights on would illuminate me for all the street to see. The Buserelin injection is easy to prepare, much more so than Pregnyl with its fiddly glass vials. Thankfully! Home then to bed.

Sept 18th: I feel so bloated and heavy with eggs that I really can't wait to get tomorrow's egg collection over and done with. At this stage I'm somewhere between uncomfortable and in pain, I have a waddle more than a walk and I am mostly wearing my loosest tracksuit bottoms down under my hips. Not a good look. Andrew is taking very good care of me, but he's anxious too about tomorrow, both that I've to undergo the procedure and that he has to produce his semen sample first thing in the morning. I joke with him that I wish that was all I had to do, but really I what I wish is that neither of us had to do any of this.

I make us a roast dinner, it's Sunday after all, and afterwards we go to the cinema to take our minds off tomorrow morning. I pack a bag when we get home – my purse, a book, warm socks. The latter were the only thing I was told to bring, I'm looking for anything else that might be of use so that I can feel prepared. I take a shower, taking care not to use anything scented during or after, as per the nurse's instructions, and Andrew does the same. Andrew stays up late, but I'm too tired and head off to bed ahead of him, falling asleep with my glasses on and my book on my face. Again.

International Snuggle Day - egg retrieval

Sept 19th: I've marked today in the calendar as International Snuggle Day, which is what we joke about on weekday mornings when neither of us fancy getting out of bed to go to work. A quick breakfast and a coffee for Andrew, nothing for me as I've been fasting since 11pm the night before, and then off we go.

The clinic is really busy when we arrive. Apparently it usually is, I'm just not normally there at that time of the morning. We've asked that I be allowed in with Andrew while he produces his sample and the nurses are happy to accommodate us. First, I'm taken in to where I'll wait before and after

the procedure to drop off my bag and be weighed. I've put on almost 4kg in the last week, and I feel every bit of it. I really hope it drops off again once my ovaries settle.

Then it's off to the 'special room' with us. Andrew has been here twice before and knows the drill, I haven't and it's such an odd situation to be in. The opposite of sexy. The room is small, with a couch (the doctor's surgery kind) a chair and a sink. There are a few magazines on the shelf but I forget about them until we're finished and about to leave, and my hurry to get back to the waiting room outweighs my sense of devilment.

Back to the waiting room, then I'm brought through to the recovery room where I strip off and don a hospital gown and hair net, and my warm socks. The anaesthetist drops by and checks that I don't have any allergies or loose teeth, and then I'm brought in to the theatre.

Apart from the discomfort of having the cannula put into the back of my left hand, I was in no distress or pain at all in theatre. I don't remember nodding off after I was given the sedative, nor have I any memory of the procedure. I remember the anaesthetist asking me after I'd woken up if I was a native Irish speaker, and then I remember waking again in the recovery room, with Andrew by my bed.

I was in a good deal of pain when I woke, and I cried a bit. The nurse gave me an injection into my buttock and it eased the pain to the level of period cramps within a few minutes. The doctor came by to tell me that they'd collected nineteen eggs, and that everything went well. Andrew asked if there was any sign of cysts or ruptures as I'd been in a bit of pain before I went in but the doctor reassured us that everything was fine. The anaesthetist dropped by to see how I was doing, and told me that when I'd come around, I was chatting away to them in Irish. I've no memory of this, and none of the staff are fluent enough to have understood what I was saying.

After tea and a biscuit, I'm allowed to go home. I ate lunch and sat on the couch beside Andrew for a little bit and watched some television, then went to bed for a heavy nap. I spent the evening on the couch with him bringing me tea and nice things to eat, and went to bed early feeling proud of us both for having made a real success of International Snuggle Day.

Netflix and chill - recovery and embryo culture

Sept 20th: I get up with Andrew in the morning, having had a good night's sleep. I'm very sore, but in good form. The pain is all in my abdomen and feels muscular, though it's not. It feels like I've done a month's worth of Pilates classes in a morning. It hurts to laugh, sneeze, stand up, sit down, etc. But my vagina doesn't appear to be sore or irritated at all, for which I am really grateful. After I'd had the ovarian diathermy (almost two years ago now) I was incredibly sore, inside and out, and got subsequent candida and urinary tract infections. It was a miserable time, and I am thrilled that I feel so well, relatively speaking, after yesterday's procedure. I'm still hugely swollen, and my breasts still ache badly. But all in all, I'm good.

Worth mentioning is that I took a small dose of Dulcolax before bed last night to try to head off any discomfort with my bowels at the pass. I'd been advised to use it when I was in pain after the ovarian surgery, and it was as helpful this morning as it was then.

I get a call from the clinic's embryologist mid-morning to tell me that of the 19 eggs collected, 18 were mature and suitable for fertilisation and 9 of those have fertilised successfully. She tells me that this is a very good result and that the embryos will now be put into the embryoscope and monitored. She'll call again on Thursday to update us.

I get another call not long after from one of the nurses, checking up on me to see that I'm recovering well. She books me in for a repeat Prolactin test in a fortnight's time, as per the

consultant's request. She also arranges for a review appointment for both of us with the consultant on October 3rd, hopefully by then we'll have some embryos in the freezer and we'll be able to discuss dates for a transfer.

My mother and sister call up to keep me company for the day, as Andrew has had to go to work. We head out for a very slow, easy stroll at lunchtime. I can't walk at any kind of pace, I'm far too sore, but I am kicking to get out of the house and it's a beautiful day outside. I'm full of good cheer until mid afternoon, then tiredness gets the better of me and I have to go to bed for a nap. I wake up feeling like a bag of cats, wretched tired and nauseous. I improve a lot after dinner and spend the evening snuggled up to Andrew on the couch.

Sept 21st: Didn't sleep too well last night, perhaps because of yesterday afternoon's nap. I decide to go to work for the morning, and feel every bump and pothole on the drive in. It'll be a while before I'm back on my bike, I guess. By lunchtime my energy is flagging, so I drive home again and take it easy on the couch for the afternoon. I'm not in great form this evening, I think it's being stuck in this limbo between not feeling very unwell but not feeling well either, and being very restricted in what I can do. Andrew is gone to the gym and I am on the couch feeling fat and grumpy. It might be PMS – the nurse advised that I could get a bleed over the next few days. I hope I do, I suspect I will feel a whole lot better for it.

Sept 22nd: Some spotting this morning but no bleed yet. Overall, I'm feeling a whole lot better. The drive to work is much more comfortable than it was yesterday and when I walk across the campus to get a coffee from the café, I can do so at something close to my normal pace.

The clinic's embryologist calls with good news; all of the nine embryos we had on day 1 have made it to day 3. One is ahead of the others, six are right where they should be and two are a little behind. The freeze is scheduled for Saturday afternoon and we'll get another call beforehand to let us know how they're doing. I was expecting a drop-off in the number of embryos at this point, and will expect the drop-off again on Saturday, but I am very encouraged after this morning's call.

The concept of an embryo is, for me, a very complicated thing to get my head around. I am thrilled at the idea that little bits of me have been spliced with little bits of Andrew and that they contain the potential to become people. I don't, however, consider the embryos as more than embryos, nor do I want to. That would be like buying a ticket and assuming you'll win the lottery. To me, they are not children and might never be. But they are a sure sign of progress in what has, for us, been a very long and difficult process. I read an article online about how people choose to use, donate or dispose of additional embryos after IVF. It doesn't make things any simpler, but it does reassure me that it's not just me who finds it complicated.

Sept. 23rd: Feeling almost back to normal today, hurrah! Well, I still feel bloated, but like I would before a bleed rather than how I have been for the last week or so. Still no sign of said bleed. I had some bloody mucus this morning and wore a pad in hope, but nothing. I didn't sleep well again last night, usually a sign that something hormonal is imminent, and I know I'll sleep like the dead once it arrives.

Now that the bloating has reduced somewhat, I'm starting to worry that all of the weight I put on in the last week is in fact cake-based, not fluid. I'll be better able to assess this once I've had a bleed. Another sign it's imminent is my fear that I am a fat, worthless and unloveable monster. Andrew, thankfully, begs to differ.

I read a news story after lunch about the efforts of the PiS political party in Poland to restrict Polish laws on abortion. Apparently the PiS party have also put forward proposed legislation to restrict IVF, including making the freezing of embryos illegal. It had never occurred to me, before reading this, that the journey we're on at the moment to try to add to our family might be considered wrong and worthy of punishment. I hope the good people of Poland fight this tooth-and-nail.

That's all for now - embryo freezing

Sept. 24th: More bloody mucus this morning, but still no bleed. My breasts are killing me. Andrew reckons they've gone up a full cup size. Under any other circumstances, I'd be thrilled.

I'm tense but optimistic, waiting for the embryologist's call. The news, when it comes, is mixed. Two of the embryos formed perfect blastocysts and have been frozen already, and she is hopeful that two more will be ready to freeze tomorrow. And the rest? I ask. She tells me that they'll be checked tomorrow too, but that they're not progressing as well. So two today and probably two tomorrow? I ask. "We'll see tomorrow" she says, and she promises that she'll call around the same time.

We spend the afternoon with tens of thousands of people on the annual March for Choice, organised by the Abortion Rights Campaign. My badly-drawn placard reads 'mo chorp, mo rogha, mo cheart' (my body, my choice, my right) – a nod to my prattling in Irish as I came around from the sedation following egg retrieval. It's an emotional day and it means the world to me to see so many people out, in spite of the pouring rain and the bus strike.

The walk into town and home again is the most exercise I've had in a while, and I'm tired after it. But in better form than I was this morning, and when we go to bed we have sex for the first time since the egg retrieval. Gently! But it's not painful, apart from the awful tenderness in my breasts. I decide to wear a sports bra overnight to see if it will help me to sleep, and it does.

Sept. 25th: I'm in much better form today after a good night's sleep. Andrew and I have a lazy morning, I do some ironing and he does some baking. The embryologist calls at around midday and unfortunately it's with bad news. The two embryos that she'd hoped to freeze today have not made it. So our total from this round is two. I cry a little once I'm off the phone, and Andrew reassures me that we only need one. My mam says the same thing later when I speak to her. It's both true and not.

Andrew is going for a run, his first long one in a while, so I decide to take my bike out and ride along with him for 10k. It'll be at a slow pace, close to home, so I'm not worried about overdoing it. It's lovely for the first fifteen minutes or so, and then it pours rain for the next forty five and we get soaked to the skin. Still, it's fun, and I'm thrilled to be back on my bike. I'm a bit sore by the end, but hopeful that I'll be okay to cycle to work at some stage this week.

I've arranged to meet a friend for coffee in the afternoon and right before I leave the house, I start to bleed. I'm relieved, I know that I should feel a lot better soon. It's very dark in colour and not too heavy yet, and though I've some cramps, they're not too bad. I expect it'll get worse before I feel better, but already my breasts are less tender and I don't feel I'll need a bra in bed tonight.

This seems like a good place to break in my journal for now: the cycle is complete, we have two day-5 blastocyst embryos in the freezer, I'm almost back to normal after the drugs and the procedure and we're back for a review in a week's time. It's been a long two months.