

March 16, 2004, 8:46AM

BREAK OUT THE BLUE

Parents get their wish and then some

By ERIC BERGER

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Jeffery and Sheryl McGowen waited a dozen years to have a child, praying, hoping and taking fertility drugs.

On Monday morning, they hit the gestational jackpot.

Jacob, Jacoby, Jason and Justin -- two sets of twins weighing from 2 pounds, 5 ounces to 3 pounds, 4 ounces -- were delivered healthy by Caesarean section at the Woman's Hospital of Texas.

Although there is no exact data on such extraordinary events, the odds of having a pair of identical twins is about 1 in 11 million, the couple's doctor told them.

McGowen, a Harris County sheriff's deputy, remarked Monday afternoon that he should play the lottery more.

"I think God has a sense of humor," said a weary but clearly elated McGowen, 34. "He took a vacation, and when he got back from it he answered all of my prayers at once."

Like most couples who have multiple births, the McGowens had been taking fertility drugs. Two eggs were implanted into Sheryl McGowen, 35, and the unlikely happened -- both eggs split.

Because multiple eggs are implanted during the in-vitro fertilization process to ensure one egg takes, it is relatively common for there to be multiple births. Between 30 percent and 40 percent of in-vitro births are multiples, said Dr. John Buster, director of the reproductive endocrinology and infertility division at Baylor College of Medicine.

The use of such procedures and fertility drugs has sent multiple pregnancies skyrocketing. Between 1980 and 2000, the number of triplets born in this country climbed from 1,300 to 7,000, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Perhaps the most famous multiples in Houston came when Nkem Chukwu gave birth to octuplets in 1998. Seven of the eight have survived and are now 5 years old.

The McGowens are fortunate that all four babies are healthy and their birthweights are good, Buster said.

The result of this marriage of science and luck is a need for a bigger family car, four car seats and as many as 10,000 to 15,000 diapers in the first year. The family's three-bedroom home in northwest Houston will do, for now.

The boys were in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit Monday and were likely to remain there for a few more days.

And while they remained on ventilators, the boys scored their first victory by not needing additional oxygen, Jeffery McGowen said.

Two beaming grandmothers stood by Sheryl McGowen's bed Monday, ready to assist the first-time parents.

Shirley Brown, the maternal grandmother, retired from Wal-Mart last April and said the timing could not be better.

"They're going to have plenty of help from me," Brown said.



Kevin Fujii / Chronicle
Sheryl and Jeffery McGowen hold photos of their quadruplets, Jacob, Jacoby, Jason and Justin.

Not to be outdone, paternal grandmother Shirley Moore said she intends to retire as a Harris County Sheriff's Department clerk a year from August.

In the past few months the parents showed little concern about taking care of four children, Moore said.

"Sheryl said she would take all that God would give her," Moore said.

The parents were unconcerned about the babies' sex, as well. But the two grandmothers confessed they had hoped for at least one little girl.

Sheryl McGowen remained at work at Baylor College of Medicine through the first 25 weeks of pregnancy. As it progressed, doctors first said she was pregnant with twins and then triplets. Shortly before Thanksgiving, doctors told the McGowens they were having a pair of twins.

The couple kept the secret until Christmas Day, when they surprised the rest of the family.

The babies were born in the 30th week of pregnancy, about 10 weeks early, but late enough that the boys have an excellent chance of leading normal, healthy lives.

"It's wonderful," Jeffery McGowen said. "There are all kinds of emotions going through me. I feel proud, happy and even a little scared. I really can't put it into words."

He saved his highest praise for his wife. "She," he said, clutching photos of his four new babies, "is a miracle."



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