

Hobbs witness to couple's unique birthing process

MARK R. FLETCHER
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Micah Wheat entered the world the same way many other babies do.

The child, born at 3:31 p.m. Tuesday afternoon, brought joy and smiles to faces of his parents and a crowd of well-wishers gathered around the nursery window.

And his father, who is youth minister at Taylor Memorial Baptist Church in Hobbs, gave the child's new mother a kiss as he handed the newborn to her — just as many other husbands and new fathers have probably done.

Most newborns, however, don't have a four-man Japanese film crew on hand to record their entry into the world and broadcast it on Japan's national television network.

But the 7 pound, 4.4 ounce baby boy, born to Melinda and Richard "Buck" Wheat at Lea Regional Medical Center, did.

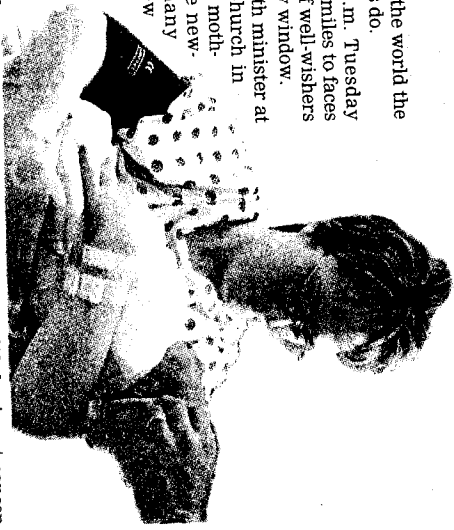
So why would the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation, or NHK as it's called in Japan, care enough about a child born in Hobbs to send a film crew to America?

Micah Wheat is the first child in New Mexico, and one of fewer than a dozen in the United States, born via a process that may solve some thorny issue created by advances in fertility treatment — particularly in vitro fertilization.

Commonly couples will create "extra" embryos in preparation for the procedure, and those extras are often simply disposed of, donated to science or left in storage.

Nightlight Christian Adoptions, the agency the Wheat's used to arrange their adoption, estimates that 150,000 - 200,000 embryos are currently in storage around the United States.

These options don't sit well with those



who believe human life begins at conception, and the California-based adoption agency believes it found an alternative — they began arranging adoptions for these embryos.

The process, referred to as a snowflake adoption, gives the genetic parents control over who receives their embryos instead of a doctor at a clinic. Nightlight Christian Adoptions is the only agency in the nation that handles snowflake adoptions.

It was this solution to a medical ethical dilemma that brought the Japanese film crew to Hobbs to film a documentary about fertility ethics.

The crew has followed the Wheat's for nearly three weeks, and expects the documentary to air sometime in this spring. The documentary, however, will not air in the United States.

"Japanese people don't think of adoption," said Satoshi Kamaya, a producer with the film crew. "For us, it's a strange way of thinking."

While he said adoptions do occur in

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Japan, Kenshi Fukuhara, also with the film crew, said the option is a bit unusual.

"For people in Japan the bond of the genetic family is more important," Fukuhara said.

The courts in the United States treat embryos as property, but the adoption agency — for ethical reasons — handles the process just like a traditional adoption, including a home study at the Wheat's home.

"We had to go through a complete home study," said Melinda Wheat. "(But) what we had at the end was not a baby, but frozen embryos."

Once the home study had been completed, the Wheat's visited a clinic in California to have the frozen embryo implanted.

The Wheat's adopted eight embryos, but only four survived the thawing process, and only one of those four was successfully implanted.

The genetic parents, the ones who left the frozen embryos, and the Wheat's have been in contact.

"They know who we are and we know who they are," Melinda Wheat said. "They were given the opportunity to say 'yes we want them to parent our child' just like a regular open adoption."

Why would the Wheat's allow so much media attention for their son's birth? The answer is simple: it lets them share a message they believe is important.

"Life itself is a miracle. God opened up doors for us to let this become a reality in our lives; for us to keep it quiet would not give him the glory," Richard Wheat said. "We really wanted God to be honored through this, and this is another opportunity for someone else who doesn't know about this process."

In addition to helping to solve the ethical problems raised by modern fertility techniques, the snowflake adoption was the Wheat's last try. "We had decided that we were not going to pursue anything else," Melinda Wheat said. "We weren't going to do anything more to have children."

Although there were still other techniques they had not tried yet, Richard and Wheat said they did not feel comfortable ethically with those choices.

"We did the things we were comfortable with," Richard Wheat said. "And we didn't do the things we weren't. . . . Each couple should do what they are comfortable with."

Medical ethics aside, having a baby — even without a Japanese film crew tagging along — is exciting.

"I don't think I ever dreamed it would be as exciting as it is," an exhausted Melinda Wheat said from her hospital bed. "But I will be more excited when I get to hold him."

Richard Wheat obviously enjoyed being a father. He spent so much time with his child in the nursery Tuesday afternoon — bathing him and holding him up for Melinda to see through the window — that Micah's mother playfully commented that "his father is hogging him."

And, of course, the new father was excited.

"Much more than I anticipated, and I had high expectations," Richard Wheat said. "I love it. I think every one should be a dad."

And of course, as grandparents tend to do, Micah's grandparents were especially excited.

"I cried when these last two grandchildren came into this world," said

Rocky Wheat, Micah's new grandfather. Rocky Wheat, who is from Garland, Texas, was at the hospital Tuesday afternoon awaiting the birth of his second grandchild. For Gail and Terry Robertson, Melinda Wheat's parents, Micah would have been special even without the Japanese media and the extra attention. Micah is their first grandchild. "I have been looking forward to this for a long time," said Gail Robertson. "He is going to be a thoroughly loved little boy."

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