

Stay

MUM

SECONDARY
INFERTILITY'S THE
HEARTACHE WE
SELDOM HEAR ABOUT.
ADRIENNE PORTER
SHARES HER
STORY WITH
ALICE GORMAN



WHEN her husband and first love, Mark Porter, was killed in a V8 crash at Bathurst in 2006, Adrienne Porter thought she had hit rock bottom. Suddenly a single mum to two-year-old Flynn, she was consumed by grief.

It suffocated her, occupied her every waking thought, and would often leave her to wonder if there was any purpose to life without Mark.

Of course there was – her gorgeous son, who is a spitting image of his race-driver dad, needed his mum to be strong. Slowly, and with the support of friends and the advice of a grief counsellor, Adrienne rebuilt her life.

"It wasn't just about losing my husband," says Adrienne, who met Mark in their home town of Auckland and moved to the Gold Coast in 2004 to pursue his racing career.

"It's about losing all I had ever known for the past 15 years that we had been together. I was 16 when we met. Suddenly I had to be a mother and father all rolled into one, it was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do."

In 2010, when she met John Rigley, a dashing young vet, Adrienne embraced the opportunity to start over and to love again.

She could never have imagined that her beautiful new relationship would also bring terrible hurt.

Adrienne and John married last year and hoped to add to their family.

They wanted a baby who was a product of their romance and they wanted to give Flynn, now nine, a much-wanted sibling.

But the hoped-for baby has not arrived and Adrienne has experienced secondary infertility, a condition where women who have previously had successful pregnancies find it difficult to conceive again.

It's a common, yet rarely mentioned problem that affects many women. In fact 25 per cent of IVF treatments undertaken in Australia are performed on women who have had children.

The couple started trying for a baby soon after marrying but after months without success Adrienne consulted her GP who told her not to worry, "You've fallen pregnant before and you will again".

Call it women's instinct, Adrienne knew things weren't right and pushed for a referral to Southport fertility specialist Kee Ong.

"Mark and I always wanted more children but we were enjoying Flynn so much we never got around to it," says Adrienne.

"It's really hard because Flynn has always asked for a sibling. John and I really want more children and I thought it would be easy, no problems whatsoever. The problem with infertility is you can't just go and see a fertility specialist, you have to try for six months. I knew that things weren't quite right after four months. The GP said, 'Stop wringing your hands, you just need to relax'."

"But I like to be in control, I'm slightly OCD, I was like 'I want it now, boom, boom, boom. This is how everything should be.'"

Dr Ong says couples often wait too long to seek fertility advice.

"Secondary infertility has been underestimated because a lot of people assume they can do it again," he says.

"There's a high incidence of depression with this group of women. They are often told, 'You should be happy at least you already have a child'. But if you want more, you want more."

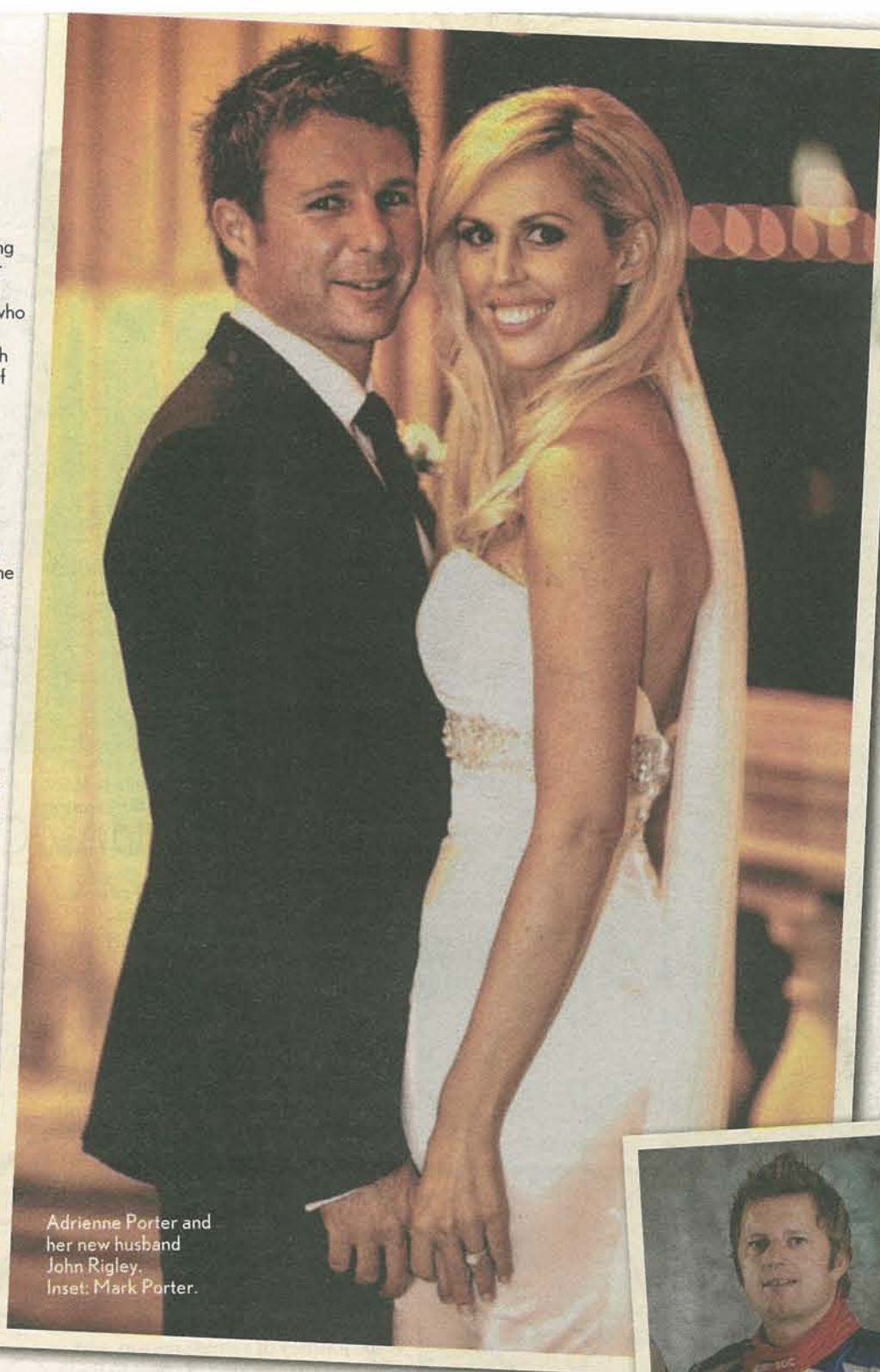
The couple quickly embarked on an extensive round of blood tests, egg counts and other invasive tests.

Dr Ong delivered the sobering news. Now aged 37, Adrienne was approaching the end of her fertile years. Her egg count was low and she had high NK, or Natural Killer, cells. There was little to no chance that she would fall pregnant naturally.

"You see Halle Berry and Reese Witherspoon have babies later in life and you think it will happen," says Adrienne.

"But this body hasn't had a baby in 10 years."

Dr Ong recommended Adrienne start IVF



Adrienne Porter and her new husband John Rigley. Inset: Mark Porter.

and in January she had her first cycle.

"We got four embryos but the first three didn't work," she says. "It's bigger than me. I have been through hell and back in my life and this is an ongoing trauma. You can't help but feel you're letting everyone down."

In May the fourth embryo was transferred and finally success.

"You're meant to wait 11 days to do a blood test and you're not supposed to do your own pregnancy tests," says Adrienne.

"But I couldn't wait. I had done six pregnancy tests by the time I went in for the blood test. The first had a slightly faint line, then I'd wait and do another. The line kept getting stronger."

The blood test confirmed what Adrienne already knew – she was pregnant.

"We were elated," she says.

"But we didn't tell anyone."

Adrienne and John's joy was short lived. The six-and-half-week scan revealed an empty sac. They had lost their baby.

"I thought the hardest part was getting pregnant. I hadn't quite ordered the pram and the cot but I was very close," says Adrienne.

"When the scan revealed the sac was empty it was very, very difficult. We had lost the baby somewhere between five and 6.5 weeks."

"We thought, 'We have jumped these hurdles, we're on the home straight'."

"It was just another blow. Another loss."

Despite her pain Adrienne had to remain

calm and composed, for the sake of her son Flynn, who doesn't know what his mum and the man he calls his 'other dad' are going through.

"I have tried to protect Flynn his whole life, I've tried to shelter him," says Adrienne.

"On the morning of Mark's funeral when I told him 'Daddy's dead, he's not coming back', he sobbed and cried, 'No my daddy is not dead'. I try to keep things upbeat. But the difficulty is that you're not just going through fertility treatment, you're also on high doses of steroids, high doses of progesterone and that makes you nasty. The drugs you're on change you as a person."

Despite the pain of loss and the challenges of the drugs, Adrienne backed up for another egg harvest.

This time only one embryo formed. It was implanted but towards the end of August she discovered it hadn't taken.

"I've decided to take September off, I just couldn't face getting all those needles again. I have every faith in Dr Ong. He said 'I really feel this will work'. I have only been doing this for nine months. Some couples have been doing this for nine to 10 years."

"When do you say 'Enough is enough?'. Are you on this road for 10 years? I'm pretty strong-willed and the most important thing for John and I is to have a child of our own and we hope more than one just not at the same time!"

"Every day I'm grateful for what I have and that I have Flynn, but it also makes you keep going."

One of the things which has helped Adrienne through the past nine months has been her blog, *Thirty Something Mama*.

With each IVF failure the former magazine editor did what comes so naturally to her: she wrote as a way of moving through the pain and the loss. What she discovered by writing in such a public forum, is that she's not alone.

Adrienne is close to finishing a book about grief and the loss of Mark, who was just 31 when he died, and when she is finished she hopes to turn her blog posts into a support book for women undergoing IVF.

"I have women who I don't know email me all the time saying, 'Thank you for doing this, you make us laugh and you make us feel better knowing that other people are going through this,'" she says.

"It's a bit taboo. Some people don't like to talk about it at all and it makes me feel better to share. There isn't a great support network for IVF patients and that's a shame. There's grief counselling for cancer patients but with IVF, well, no one is dying but it is about grief and it is about loss."

"I don't think there is enough support out there. Every two weeks I sit down and write. If it helps one, two, 50 or 100 women feel better and makes me feel better at the same time."

"Talking to someone who has been through it is the best sort of counselling you can get."

Dr Ong says women should be more proactive about their fertility and consider options such as egg freezing in their early 30s. A woman's peak fertility is between 18 and 30 years of age.

"Adrienne's age is OK and there is definitely hope, but give it a couple of more years and she will really struggle," says Dr Ong.

"I only have had three patients over the age of 45 who have managed to have babies and worldwide there are no live births from women over the age of 47 using their own eggs."

"We need to say to people who want to

have children, whether they are starting to try or just thinking of having more, they should be more proactive."

Adrienne describes herself as a realist and says she will not wallow in self pity.

She knows there are women who face worse – women who have lost pregnancies at 21 weeks, or even worse, at birth.

"I've always been strong but I'm one hell of a lot tougher now because of all that I've been through. Not much can break me and the support from John and friends and family keeps me going," she says.

"Ultimately I still have John coming home. You can have all the friends and family in the world but having the support of your partner, of that person who knows you inside and out, who knows when you want to be comforted and when you just want to be left alone makes such a difference."

