



FERTILITY

No quick fix for ageing



KARIN HAMMARBERG RN, BSc, PhD
Jean Hailes Research Unit, Monash University; Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority

Patients' knowledge about the negative impact of age on fertility and pregnancy health is inadequate.

MOST people want and expect to have children.

Decisions about childbearing are influenced by many factors, but for some people, involuntary childlessness or having fewer children than planned can be directly linked to age-related infertility.

Public perceptions that the reproductive window is becoming longer and that assisted reproductive technologies (ART) can overcome age-related infertility are reinforced by media messages about women (often celebrities) having 'miracle babies' late in life.

The reality is that our fertile years are limited and the chance of having a baby with ART after age 40 is minuscule.

GPs can play a crucial role in educating patients about how to optimise fertility.

REPRODUCTIVE LIFE PLAN

People's ability to make informed reproductive health decisions depends on understanding the factors influencing fertility, including the most crucial determinant – age.

RACGP guidelines state that patients should be assisted in "developing a reproductive life plan that includes whether they want to have children" and "the number, spacing and timing of intended children".

They also recommend GPs discuss with their patients how fertility reduces with age.

While GPs perceive barriers for raising these questions with patients, studies show that pre-conception counselling addressing risk factors prior to pregnancy does not cause anxiety and that couples, including those who are not currently trying to conceive, appreciate the benefits of pre-conception health messages.

FERTILITY FALLACIES

Last year US psychologist Jean Twenge argued that evidence about the risks of delayed childbearing was exaggerated, unbalanced and based on "statistics from a time before electricity, antibiotics, or fertility treatment".

The piece went viral in social and traditional media under

catchy headlines such as "Everything you thought you knew about age and fertility was wrong".

In the face of such comforting messages it can be hard to get people to accept that fertility declines with increasing age.

Exactly when the decline starts, and this varies greatly between individuals, and by exactly how much it declines for each additional year, can be debated, but it does happen.

Furthermore, while access to electricity and antibiotics allows us to live longer, it does not prolong the reproductive life span; the average age of menopause has not changed.

IVF A 'QUICK FIX'?

In a survey of more than 3000 childless women, 65% believed that premenopause, ART can help most women to have a baby using their own eggs.

The misguided belief that ART such as IVF can help overcome age-related infertility may in part explain the increasing age of women who seek ART treatment: 26.5% of women who had ART treatment in Australia and New Zealand in 2011 were aged 40 or older.

The irrefutable fact is that female age is the single most

important factor determining a successful ART outcome.

In 2011 the chance of a live birth per treatment cycle for women aged 30–34 years was 25.3%.

This dropped to 16.9% for women aged 35–39 years and a dismal 6.6% for women aged 40–44 years.

While less pronounced, increasing male age also reduces the chance of ART success.

ART treatment is physically, emotionally and financially demanding.

Improved awareness about the limitations of ART is needed to avoid the personal suffering of failed treatment and the

associated cost to the healthcare system.

For pre-conception information for consumers and health professionals go to www.yourfertility.org.au where fact sheets, podcasts and other resources are available to help start the conversation about age and fertility with patients.

Your Fertility is a state- and Commonwealth-funded awareness campaign to assist people to make informed childbearing decisions.

References are available on request

Jean Hailes for Women's Health is a national, not-for-profit organisation focusing on clinical care, innovative research and practical educational opportunities for health professionals and women. www.jeanhailes.org.au

Ageing matters

The impact of age on reproductive outcomes:

- A comparison of fertility-related outcomes between women aged 30 and 40 shows that the monthly chance of conception decreases from 20% to 5%; the risk of chromosomal abnormalities in the fetus increases from one in 385 to one in 66; and the risk of miscarriage increases from 12% to 34%.
- The likelihood of pre-existing medical conditions, obstetric complications, adverse labour and birth outcomes increase with advancing maternal age.
- Men's fertility decreases with increasing age.
- Advanced paternal age increases the risk of autism in the offspring.