



**EMBARGO until 11am 23<sup>rd</sup> September**

**PRESS RELEASE**

***Infertility and its treatments have a considerable impact on people's lives.***

The Women's Health Council, a state agency to promote health and social gain for women, today (23<sup>rd</sup> September) launched two reports on *Infertility and Its Treatments*. One provides an overview of the range of psychological, emotional, social and practical difficulties that couples affected by fertility problems often encounter. The other focuses on biomedical issues and reviews the effectiveness of current treatments.

WHC decided to focus on the issue of infertility because it is a medical and social condition that often causes significant pain and distress to couples and which many people go to great lengths to overcome. It has been ranked as one of the great stressors in life, comparable to divorce and death in the family. However, it is still a topic that is not widely discussed or for which help is easily accessible.

Launching the report, Ms. Luddy, Director of the WHC and a former member of the Commission on Assisted Human Reproduction, stated: "As a society, we need to be more aware of the issue of infertility and become more sensitive towards it. Infertility can cause a major disruption in people's lives because it interferes with people's desires and cultural expectations. Infertility treatment can have substantial physical, social and emotional repercussions, especially for women who undergo the majority of invasive investigations and procedures regardless of the cause of infertility. We hope that our reports will help to raise awareness of this important issue and bring information to patients, service providers and policy makers in this very complex area".

It is currently estimated that infertility affects one in six couples in Ireland. The use of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) has increased significantly in recent years, and the number of babies born as a result of in vitro fertilization (IVF) has more than doubled from 135 in 2000 to 301 in 2005. The demand for advice and treatment for fertility problems is also likely to increase over the coming years because of the trend to delay parenthood to pursue career and financial security, and an increase in obesity and sexually transmitted infections.

In terms of the effectiveness of ART, the most recent figures, from 2005, show that the percentage of deliveries per IVF cycle is 21.1% for a fresh cycle and 11.3% for a frozen cycle, which is in line with European figures. Success is dependent on many factors, including patient age, weight and pregnancy history, and variations of IVF procedures, such as the number of embryos transferred and the method of embryo transfer.

Maternal age is considered the most important determinant of conception, and much attention has been dedicated in the public arena to the increasing age of first time

mothers. While women are often criticised for 'waiting too long', they often feel compelled to wait until their career is well established for fear of experiencing discrimination at work because of pregnancy or consequent caring responsibilities. Likewise, financial concerns also play a part in this delay, with couples wishing to feel secure in their employment and housing arrangements before embarking on parenthood. Only an increased commitment to gender equality and family friendly policies at work will encourage women to start trying at a younger age.

Gender is a key aspect in the experience of infertility and its treatments. All evidence points to a much more negative effect of infertility on women's lives. Women in infertile couples have been found to have lower self-esteem, to be more depressed, report lower life-satisfaction, and be more likely to blame themselves for their infertility than their male counterparts. They also experience more isolation and feel a higher level of stigma. Women also carry a disproportionate burden in treatment. It is most often women who undergo the bulk of invasive procedures, are responsible for daily monitoring of their cycles, and experience disruption in their schedules to accommodate rigid treatment regimens. This situation further emphasises their role and identity as procreators and makes it more difficult to cope with the distress of unsuccessful treatment.

In order to improve the experience of people undergoing fertility treatment, the Council recommends that following:

- o Increased availability of information on treatments, including success rates and possible repercussions, and support groups.
- o Increased attention to psychological and social issues during treatment.
- o Adoption of a couple-centred approach.

The Council's key recommendation in terms of policy and legislation is the implementation of the report of the Commission on Assisted Human Reproduction, which was published in 2005. Ireland has no official body or legislation for the regulation and licensing of clinics offering IVF or other ART, despite their presence in the country since the late 1980s.

Speaking at the launch, Ms. Martina Devlin, an author and newspaper columnist who has personal experience of infertility and IVF, said: "I am very impressed by these reports and I hope they will help to bring attention to this very sensitive issue. Infertility is more than just a medical condition: it has huge social, psychological and emotional implications for couples. Part of the problem is that there is still a sense of shame attached to infertility, and silence surrounding the subject. Infertile couples can end up feeling not just empty - but excluded".



### Notes for the Editor

There are 10 clinics operating in Ireland at the moment. However, only 6 of them are members of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology reporting system and one provides only NaPro Technology (Natural Procreative Technology) treatment.

*In vitro fertilisation* (IVF) is the most common form of treatment in Ireland, closely followed by *intra uterine insemination* (IUI). An average cost for one IVF cycle is in the region of €4,000<sup>1</sup> and for IUI is €800. Using donor sperm usually adds between €300 and €800 to the overall cost, while using egg donation is considerably more expensive costing between €5,000 and €12,000. Moreover, fertility drugs, which are commonly used with these procedures, can cost in the region of €2,000-3,000 depending on how a woman responds to treatment. Additional costs in terms of initial consultations/investigations, blood tests, and counselling fees are also common and can be substantial.

Fertility clinics in Ireland are all private, and, while public patients do have some access to them, it is limited and at the clinics' discretion. Some financial assistance is provided by the State for ART patients. They can offset the cost of private treatment against their income tax liability and the cost of prescribed ART medicines is an allowable expense under the Drugs Payment Scheme for up to three cycles.

The report *Infertility and Its Treatments: a psycho-social review* is available from the Women's Health Council website at: [http://www.whc.ie/documents/40\\_infertPsychosocial.pdf](http://www.whc.ie/documents/40_infertPsychosocial.pdf)

The full and summary reports *Infertility Treatments for Women: a review of bio-medical evidence* are available from the Women's Health Council website at these link respectively:

[http://www.whc.ie/documents/40\\_infertBiomedEvid\\_Full.pdf](http://www.whc.ie/documents/40_infertBiomedEvid_Full.pdf)

[http://www.whc.ie/documents/40\\_infertBiomedEvid\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.whc.ie/documents/40_infertBiomedEvid_Summary.pdf)

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<sup>1</sup> These prices are based on personal communications for eight of the ten Irish clinics during the summer months in 2009. The remainder did not respond to our inquiries.