

IVF DURING CORONAVIRUS

There are many hidden and private tragedies that seem almost to be sub plots of the worldwide drama that envelops us all in this strange time of Covid19.

All the news we get appears to revolve around the worldwide pandemic and its traumatic effects globally. However, written into this hard-hitting drama, there are a mass of personal stories of loss and suffering as people take stock of the immense impact that this lockdown has had on their families and futures. One story of quiet desperation is that of all the couples whose only hope of their own family and future revolves around medical intervention to aid their chances of becoming the parents they yearn to be. On April 15th all clinics suspended IVF after guidance from the British Fertility Society. All new procedures were banned and on-going treatments are suspended indefinitely.

Surprisingly, 1 in 7 couples may have difficulties conceiving naturally and around 20,000 babies are likely to be born annually in the UK as a result of successful treatment. That's 20,000 desperately wanted children and, unless things change in the near future, that's a heartbreakingly huge loss of such babies for the coming year.

A significant number of women seek IVF in their late 30s or early 40s. It can take time to realise that pregnancy is not just taking a while, and many people just don't meet, or indeed want, to commit to a family life until then. By the time these couples work through the system and embark on IVF, there is often no time to delay as egg reserves decline rapidly with age.

IVF is hugely stressful even under normal circumstances. Hormone injections can feel scary and affect moods. The endless waiting, to see if each stage is progressing satisfactorily, is immensely stressful.

Women have to embark on a gruelling round of medications, fertility hormones and blood tests. The process can fail at any stage and once through the initial drug treatment there is then a round of monitoring and further blood tests before egg collection under sedation.

Fertilisation involves further hormone medication and finally there's the egg transfer, but this will only happen if all has gone according to plan and the egg has fertilised. Couples will not embark on this process lightly.

It puts tremendous pressure on them, both emotionally and often financially too, particularly if they seek treatment in a private clinic, as many are forced to do in light of the NHS restrictions around age and those choosing to embark on more than 3 attempts.

These interventions are gruelling and are extremely likely to affect moods at a time when calmness for us all is in short supply.

Couples can end up in an IVF bubble where everything seems on hold. Appointments will override work, holidays and the normality of everyday life.

To be ready to do all this is tough enough, but now these couples have had their treatments brutally stopped. Many are already in the first stages or tensely waiting to start.

To boost their chances of success, many women will often have embarked on a regime of extreme healthcare that may involve additional processes such as acupuncture and expensive supplements, doing whatever they can to raise the possibility of a pregnancy.

This may feel like the only way they can try to take some elements of control at a time of great uncertainty and risk.

Yoga, diet and the right exercise regime can also be helpful.

So what happens when all this preparation is suddenly and brutally blocked?

There is the same uncertainty over life that we are all currently experiencing, but the unknowns for these couples will reach out far into their futures and may feel as if it could affect their whole existence.

It's hard to stay in the present when contemplating this painful possibility.

For many people IVF is a private affair.

To avoid probing questions, or curiosity from others, they may choose to keep the whole thing to themselves; it's also a protection against feared disappointment of those around that care for them.

But under the new normal we are all isolated. There's nobody outside who can offer a loving hug or a cosy chat. Grief can be a divisive process, we all face loss in our own way. And for these couples, this time can feel just like a bereavement.

For many people, many of their future dreams are bound up in the hope of a family life, and for these couples this can retreat with every month that passes.

The stages of bereavement are well documented. To some extent we are all going through them as we are left to face up to the daily losses that we are experiencing.

During this corona pandemic, as a society we meander daily through denial, anger, bargaining and depression, before we can (hopefully) meet acceptance. But for those who live in fear of a future they never expected, there is a further stage – let's call it Anticipatory Grief.

This is likely to be exacerbated by hearing endless reports of people expressing irritation while cooped up with children they are having to entertain and home-school. And by the 'statistics', which suggest that lockdown, will lead to a 2021 baby boom.

Be kind to those around you, there is no way of knowing what private and personal health issues they may be experiencing locked away in their homes.

My hope is that one of the first places that will return to normal will be clinics.

We all need dentists, scans, physiotherapists and those appointments we took for granted. There are those with far more serious health issues that just can't be shelved indefinitely.

And hopefully, those making decisions regarding the future of our people could put IVF couples on the essentials list.

Not just for them, but also for those 20,000 babies that would be waiting for life.

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