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'A stark, distressing picture': emotional, social and economic impact of fertility problems far greater than previously recognised

National Fertility Awareness Week 31 Oct – 6 Nov

A major new national survey from leading patient charity Fertility Network UK, released at the start of National Fertility Awareness Week, reveals that the emotional, social and economic impact of fertility problems is far greater than previously recognised.

Fertility Network UK's survey, conducted in association with Middlesex University London, assessed the impact of failing to conceive and the subsequent impact of fertility treatment on both women and men. Commenting on the survey, Susan Seenan, chief executive of Fertility Network UK said: 'Fertility Network UK's major new national survey paints an incredibly stark, distressing picture of what it is like to experience fertility problems in this country.'

'Sadly, in the UK, the inability to have children without medical help means having to face a series of emotional, social and financial hurdles: these include often having to pay crippling amounts of money for your own medical treatment, not receiving appropriate medical information from your GP, a lack of affordable, accessible counselling and emotional support, a paucity of workplace support and the deterioration of core relationships. Far more needs to be done to help individuals through the far-reaching devastation fertility issues wreak; that is why National Fertility Awareness Week is so important.'

One key finding of the survey is that levels of emotional distress were far higher than in a previous study. Approaching half of all respondents in 2016 reported on average feeling sad, out of control, frustrated, helpless, fearful and worried nearly all of the time. In addition, 90 per cent of respondents reported feeling depressed and 42% of respondents experienced suicidal feelings (the charity's survey in 1997 showed 20% of fertility patients reported suicidal feelings). Those who had unsuccessful treatment reported greater distress as well as more frequent suicidal thoughts.

More than two-thirds of respondents (70%) reported some detrimental impact on their relationships with partners; 15% of respondents stated their relationship with their partner ended or was strained as a result of the impact of fertility problems and treatment.

The survey reveals that lack of medical help, lack of information and emotional support, and lack of workplace policies are the other key issues facing fertility patients. Despite having a recognised medical condition, more than half of all respondents (54%) had to pay for some or all of their medical care: respondents spent on average £11,378 on investigations and treatment; 10% had spent more than £30,000. One-third of patients accessing NHS-funded treatment had to pay for additional tests and treatments.

Three out of four respondents (74%) stated their GP did not provide sufficient information. Only one quarter of respondents reported the existence of a supportive workplace policy; while less than half received really good support from their employer.

The majority of respondents would have liked to have had counselling if it was free; less than half of the respondents (44%) did have counselling and, of those that did have counselling, more than half had to pay for some or all of this psychological help. More than half of all respondents reported a lack of local peer support services.

Professor Adam Balen, chair of the British Fertility Society said: 'This new national survey shows the true picture of living with fertility problems for many people. It can be an incredibly distressing time and undergoing treatment and facing costs can place a huge amount of stress and pressure on couples and their families. Worryingly many clinical commissioning groups are offering fewer cycles of IVF and going against the national guidance on this. Treatment needs to be available on the NHS and this current situation is unacceptable.'

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Notes to editors:

- The full report *Fertility Network UK Survey on The Impact of Fertility Problems, October 2016* by Dr Nicky Payne N.Payne@mdx.ac.uk and Prof Olga van den Akker is available to download at www.fertilitynetworkuk.org/news-media/news There were a total of 865 responses (from predominantly women). The average age of respondents when starting fertility treatment was 32.5; typically respondents had been trying to conceive prior to this for 4.4 years.
- National Fertility Awareness Week 31 October- 6 November seeks to change perceptions, raise awareness and provide support for everyone struggling with fertility issues www.nfaw.org.uk/ This year's #HiddenFaces campaign reveals the real people behind fertility struggles. See #HiddenFaces videos at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvRHtFRNTJYS-mJJuvu6V1w>
- Fertility Network UK provides practical and emotional support, authoritative information and advice for anyone experiencing fertility issues. The charity works to raise the profile and understanding of fertility issues and to push for timely and equitable provision of fertility treatment throughout the UK.
- Fertility Network UK provides a free and impartial Support Line 0121 323 5025
- Fertility Network UK supports people. We rely on voluntary donations to continue our vital work. You can donate now by visiting www.justgiving.com/infertilitynetwork
- National Fertility Awareness Week culminates in The Fertility Show 5-6 Nov 2016 at Olympia, London - the biggest and best-attended fertility show in the world.