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Male infertility is emasculating, its treatment one-sided and insensitive and emotional support is lacking, first qualitative survey of men's experiences of fertility problems finds

National Fertility Awareness Week 30 Oct-5 Nov 2017

#FertilityFellas #TalkFertility #NFAWUK

Infertility hits men hard - affecting their mental health, self-esteem, relationships, sex life, masculinity, career and finances; its treatment is one-sided and insensitive, and emotional support is scarce, according to the first qualitative survey of men's experiences of fertility problems. What men would like to see now is a shift from infertility being seen as a 'women's issue' within society and vastly improved support for men, in particular online.

The survey, conducted by national charity Fertility Network UK and researchers at Leeds Beckett University, is released during National Fertility Awareness Week 30 Oct - 5 Nov 17.

The majority of respondents had direct experience of male factor infertility: 51 per cent male factor alone; 15 per cent both male and female factor infertility; and 19 per cent unexplained infertility or no diagnosis. Participants had, on average, been trying to conceive for five years.

The majority of respondents (93%) stated their well-being had been impacted by fertility issues. Men reported fertility issues to be emasculating, distressing and isolating, harming their self-identity, and causing stress, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

'the most upsetting, dark and emasculating experience of my life'

'it made me feel less of a man'; 'I now suffer with anxiety'

'it made me feel worthless that I couldn't have kids'

Fertility issues had a deep impact on intimate partner relationships and a couple's sex life, as well as family and friends, especially if others had children.

'Our sex life immediately took a hit...'; 'Seeing a baby I would feel jealousy, envy and anger...'

'I pushed my wife away... I didn't understand why she would want to be with me when I couldn't give her the child she so wanted.'

'I started rejecting my wife and told her to leave me... I was having problems having sex'

'We have drifted from friends who have children. You feel like you're stuck in a void of society, alone on an island'

Men often felt excluded and marginalised during fertility treatment, with some respondents reporting a lack of sensitivity from healthcare professionals.

'The whole experience has been focused towards my wife... even consultant's letters about my genitalia are addressed to my wife. There seems to be no equality'

'I now know what it feels like to be identified on official documentation... as an appendage to one's spouse'

'Fertility treatment needs to become less female-centric'

'A very rude GP ... then on the analysis result, rather than explaining the result, called me at work to ask if I had had a vasectomy'

Men noted that the majority of support before, during and after treatment is aimed at women.

'There's been no support and no follow up'; 'I haven't found any support groups for men'

'Fertility clinic just told us they could not do anything...if it is a male they write them off'

'I set up my own [internet forum] due to lack of support groups for men'

Men's career prospects and finances suffered too.

'I had a good career, good money and I went from this to losing my job due to all the stress... I did not discuss this with my employer as I felt too ashamed...'

'this has impacted my career profession. I could be a director now if I'd been a father in this family orientated business'

'I have kept it firmly away from my working life... I'm not going to display any weaknesses'

'We spent around £30,000 on treatment and will be repaying the debt for many years'

Susan Seenan, chief executive Fertility Network UK said: 'Men are half of the fertility equation; when they cannot create the family they long for without medical help they suffer and struggle physically and mentally just as women do, yet our major new survey with Leeds Beckett University shows that men's needs are far too often ignored, with support scarce before, during and after fertility treatment. This is unacceptable; we hope this survey will challenge the silence around male infertility and facilitate more male support groups.'

Dr Esmee Hanna, lead researcher, said: 'We know from this survey and our previous research that men find infertility an isolating and emotionally distressing experience. This survey shows just how impactful fertility issues can be to men's lives, including on their work, relationships and self-identities. There sadly still remains stigma and taboo about male infertility within society, but it is really encouraging that so many men shared their personal perspectives in this survey and that Fertility Network UK are leading the way in starting conversations about how fertility issues affect both men and women.'

Prof Brendan Gough, co-researcher, said: 'The men who participated in our survey were only too pleased to share their stories with us, having never really had the opportunity to share

their experiences with others before. As we have found with our previous studies, many men are keen to talk about their struggles with infertility, especially in safe spaces such as anonymous surveys and online forums. Looking ahead, we would encourage fertility services to accommodate men's perspectives during consultations and treatment regimes, and hope that a range of support options could be made available to men experiencing infertility.'

National Fertility Awareness Week: providing support, improving awareness, raising funds and changing perceptions www.nfaw.org.uk

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Fertility Network UK media volunteers are available on request.

- There were 41 responses to the online questionnaire, totalling nearly 24,000 words of data; each respondent wrote, on average, 585 words.
- National Fertility Awareness Week 30 Oct- 5 Nov seeks to change perceptions, improve awareness, raise funds and provide support for everyone struggling with fertility issues. www.nfaw.org.uk
- National Fertility Awareness Week culminates in The Fertility Show 4-5 November 2017 at Olympia, London - the biggest and best-attended fertility show in the world. <https://www.fertilityshow.co.uk/>
- 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. www.fertilitynetworkuk.org
- 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
- Leeds Beckett University has more than 28,000 students on programmes in Leeds and abroad and more than 3,000 staff.
- Leeds Beckett was one of the first universities to hold the Customer Service Excellence standard across the whole institution.
- 96 per cent of Leeds Beckett University's UK students were in work or further study six months after graduating. Source: Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education 2015/16.