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IVF story miraculous but risks ahead, says leading patient charity Fertility Network UK

Aileen Feeney, chief executive of Fertility Network UK, said: 'The IVF story over the last 40 years is miraculous: developments in IVF technologies coupled with improvements in IVF success rates mean an estimated 8 million babies have been born worldwide. But there is a dark, often unacknowledged, side to the IVF story: fertility treatment still fails more than it works and much more needs to be done to provide support for the emotional impact of infertility, and in recognising the trauma involuntary childlessness wreaks.'

Sadly, IVF's scientific advancements have gone hand-in-hand with an increase in rationing of medical treatment based on arbitrary and non-medical criteria such as where you live. If Louise Brown's parents wanted to try NHS IVF today, they would be turned down by the vast majority (83%) of England's clinical commissioning groups on social rationing grounds: although Mrs Brown was clinically infertile, Mr Brown had a child from a previous relationship.

England pioneered the development of IVF but that achievement means far less if the people who benefit from this amazing, life-creating technology are determined by their postcode or pay packet. Fertility Network urges the government to take action now - or we are creating a society where only the more affluent will have access to IVF.

Looking ahead to the next 40 years, Fertility Network also wants to see girls and boys being taught to value and protect their fertility; men being recognised as half the fertility equation, and a greater openness around talking about fertility problems.'

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Notes to editors:

1. Scotland offers the gold standard of fertility treatment: three full IVF cycles for women under 40 (as recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence), plus access for couples with children from previous relationships.

In England, data from campaign group Fertility Fairness shows just four clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) out of 208 (1.9 per cent) offer the gold standard of three full IVF cycles for women under 40, including access for couples with children from previous relationships. The remaining 98 per cent of England's CCGs ration NHS IVF by postcode.

In Wales and Northern Ireland, nowhere offers the IVF gold standard. In Wales, women under 40 are entitled to just two full IVF cycles, including access for couples with children from previous relationships. In Northern Ireland, women under 40 are offered just one partial IVF cycle, including access for couples with children from previous relationships.

In England, seven CCGs (3.4 per cent) have removed or suspended all NHS IVF; 61.5 per cent of England's CCGs offer either one full or one partial IVF cycle; 23.6 per cent of England's CCGs offer two IVF cycles and 11.5 per cent of England's CCGs offer three full IVF cycles.

2. As well as cutting the number of IVF cycles offered, CCGs are finding alternative ways to reduce provision - introducing additional criteria not in the NICE guidelines, such as social rationing.

Social rationing: the overwhelming majority of England's CCGs (82.7 per cent) do not enable access to NHS IVF if one of the couple has children from a previous relationship.

Offering a partial IVF cycle rather than a full IVF cycle: NICE guidelines recommend that clinically eligible couples should have access to three full IVF cycles, where a full cycle of IVF treatment is defined as one round of ovarian stimulation followed by the transfer of all resultant fresh or frozen embryos (some people may create a large number of embryos to transfer). However, approaching half of all CCGs (49 per cent) use their own definition of what constitutes a full IVF cycle - and only transfer a finite number of embryos, rather than all resultant embryos -this is a partial IVF cycle.

Male criteria: in March 2018, Bath and North East Somerset CCG introduced male age and weight restrictions. The male partner (in the case of heterosexual couples) should be aged 55 or younger, and should have a BMI of 30 or less. In February 2017, Mansfield and Ashfield CCG and Newark and Sherwood CCG introduced male age criteria: men have to be under 40 to access NHS IVF.

Arbitrary age criteria: some CCGs stipulate entirely arbitrary age criteria for access to NHS IVF, in contravention of NICE's guidelines stating that eligible women under 40 should be offered three full IVF cycles and eligible women aged 40-42 should be offered one full IVF cycle. Approaching half of all CCGs (48.6 per cent; 101 CCGs) do not offer NHS IVF to women aged 40-42; 10 per cent of CCGs refuse access to NHS IVF if women are over 35.

3. Historical data from Fertility Fairness shows the scale of disinvestments in recent years in NHS fertility services.

	0 cycle providers	1 cycle providers	2 cycle providers	3 cycle providers
2017	3.4%	61.5%	23.6%	11.5%
2016	2%	60%	22%	16%
2015	1%	57%	24%	18%
2014	1%	52%	29%	18%
2013	3%	49%	24%	24%

4. 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.

5. *The Impact of Fertility problems 2016* by Fertility Network UK is available for download a Full report: <http://fertilitynetworkuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/SURVEY-RESULTS-Impact-of-Fertility-Problems.pdf>

6. Fertility Network UK provides a free and impartial Information Line 01424 732361 and a Support Line 0121 323 5025.

7. 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