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Men's experiences of infertility: Findings from a qualitative questionnaire study

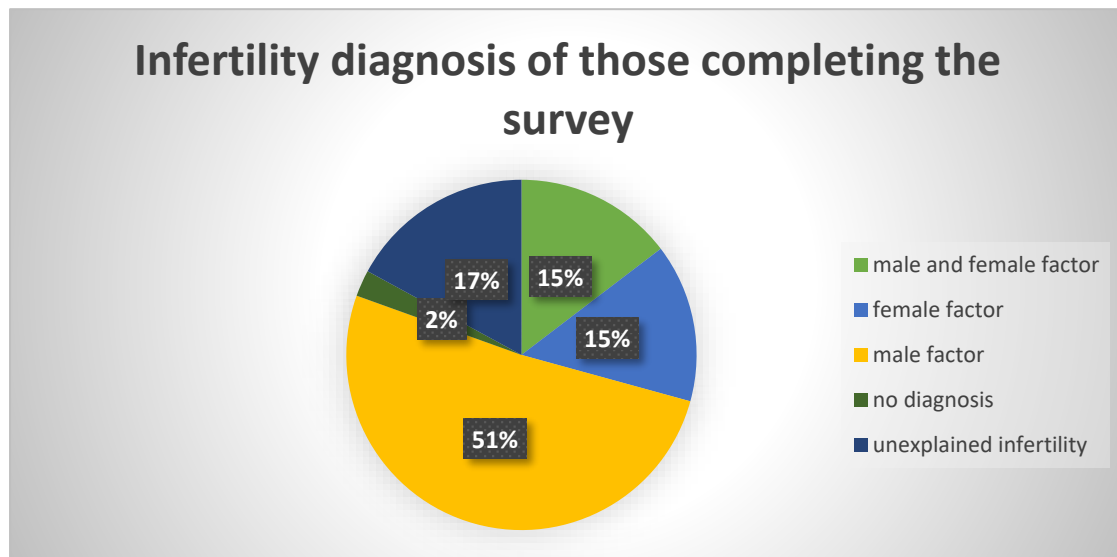
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Background and approach

During Spring/Summer of 2017 we asked men to share their experiences of fertility problems with us. We used an online Qualitative Questionnaire which allows people to write about their experiences in as much detail as they want while remaining anonymous. The questionnaire study was designed and conducted by a team of researchers at Leeds Beckett University in partnership with Fertility Network UK. We gained ethical approval for the research from the relevant Leeds Beckett University ethics committee (Ref: 36153).

We advertised the questionnaire online through social media and existing networks and in total we received 41 responses, totalling nearly 24,000 words of data (an average of 585 words per respondent). A qualitative questionnaire study of this nature has never been conducted with men about fertility issues before. A series of open-ended questions was included to encourage respondents to tell their stories relating to key areas, such as support, emotions, relationships with family and friends, work and finance as well as encounters with health care professionals and their own recommendations for improving support for men going through similar experiences.

Key demographics



- On average those completing the survey had been trying to conceive for five years
- 78% of respondents identified as White British
- 37 of the 41 who completed the survey were from the UK
- 71% of respondents were not currently undergoing fertility treatment at the time of completing the survey

Key findings

Wellbeing

93% of respondents reported that their wellbeing had been affected by the experience of infertility, causing poor mental wellbeing and self-esteem issues.

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

'I now suffer with anxiety'

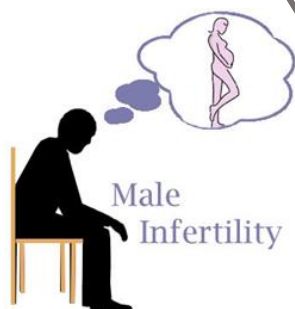
'...it made me feel worthless that I couldn't have kids'

Infertility was regarded as a form of grief that men were trying to come to terms with.

"we're both gutted. Our future looks very different to how we'd imagined it. We still can't believe that we have been robbed of the opportunity to have a family of our own"

'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.'

Seeing a baby I would feel jealousy, envy and anger...'



Impact on relationships

Fertility issues were presented as testing intimate partnership relationships - but also as holding the potential to strengthen bonds between couples in the longer term. Men reported feeling guilty about fertility issues and that they had 'let down' their female partners. Men discussed the challenges of infertility and their relationships with friends and family too, with many finding it hard to be around friends who have children, noting that often family and friends don't 'get' why fertility issues are so distressing.

Impact on work and finances

The impact of fertility issues, including time off for treatment, on men's working lives was highly varied among those who responded to our questions. Only 13 respondents (31%) either hadn't disclosed to their employers or felt it had no impact on their work. Some men felt their workplace had been supportive, but others noted a much more difficult experience:

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

'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...'

60% of respondents identified financial implications of fertility issues, with the cost of private treatment and subsequent debt being a common issue:

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



Experience of healthcare professionals

- Men reported feeling excluded and marginalised by the attention and focus being directed towards their female partners
- Some participants highlighted a lack of sensitivity among clinical staff about the experience or news that people were receiving within fertility clinics
- Men perceived a lack of emotional support services provided by health care professionals and the fertility clinics they encountered:

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

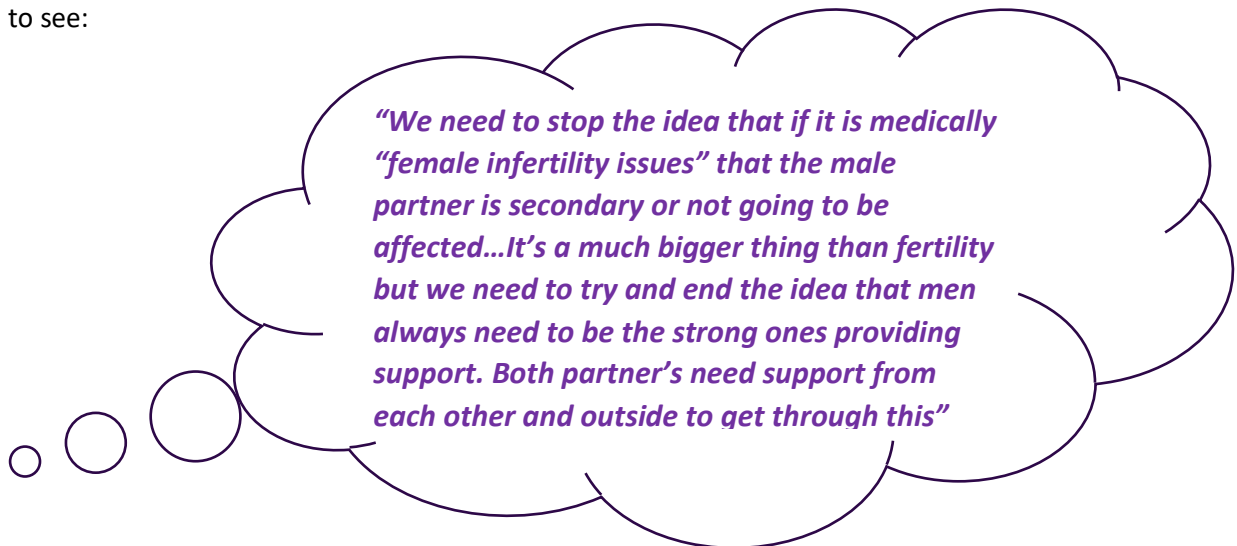
'Fertility treatment needs to become less female-centric'

Accessing support

39% of respondents had not sought or had any other support for their fertility issues, demonstrating that a large proportion of men are potentially not receiving support (although some may not feel they require any additional support). As with healthcare, men noted that support services for those contending with fertility issues are aimed specifically at women:

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

Men advocated better support for men and noted that greater access to support and advice for men would have benefitted them during their fertility issues. Forums, online groups, more counselling and male only support groups were all suggested as possible options for support that they would like to see:



Infertility can therefore be a deeply distressing and challenging experience for men, affecting their mental wellbeing, self-esteem, relationships and their career and finances. Fertility treatment is perceived to be female-focused - which is burdensome to women, and exclusionary to men. Men would like to see a change in how society views fertility issues, making it less stigmatised and better understood. The survey findings show that men may need support to deal with the challenges that infertility presents – helping men, partners and the couple relationship.