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Welsh fertility plans severely detrimental to patients and a major step backwards warns national charity Fertility Network UK

Plans to change how NHS fertility treatment is accessed in Wales are severely detrimental to patients, a major step backwards for the region and go against the direction of travel in the rest of the UK, warns leading national charity Fertility Network UK.

The changes outlined in the Welsh Health Specialised Services Committee's (WHSSC's) proposed new fertility policies include:

- Barring women aged 40-42 from accessing NHS fertility treatment;
- Barring single people from accessing NHS fertility treatment;
- Making it harder for same-sex couples to access NHS-funded IVF by requiring them to first pay privately for 12 rounds of IUI, rather than the current 6 IUI rounds that is required; and
- Barring people who have paid privately for fertility preservation (freezing eggs or sperm) from accessing NHS fertility treatment if they need it in the future.

Commenting on these proposed changes, which are open for public consultation until 27 February 2023, Emma Rees, Fertility Network's Wales co-ordinator, said: 'We are appalled and angry at the massive detrimental effect these proposed changes will have on fertility patients in Wales. They put becoming a parent further out of reach for so many groups of people: women over 40, same-sex couples and single people, as well as unfairly penalising individuals who take a proactive approach to their reproductive health and choose to freeze their eggs or sperm.'

Ms Rees added: 'We are also deeply concerned about the number of other couples that could be affected if these changes are implemented. In Wales in particular, it can take between three to four years from starting to try to conceive to actually beginning fertility

treatment. If you're under 35, you have to have been trying for two years before your GP will refer you for further tests in secondary care; if you're over 35, you have to have been trying for a year before a referral for tests such as laparoscopies.'

'However, current waiting times for gynaecological tests and procedures can be as long as three years in some parts of Wales. There can then be a slight wait to begin treatment at a fertility clinic. This means that women in their mid to late 30s, who are hoping to become mums, but who may not have yet met a partner prepared to commit to parenthood or who aren't ready yet to begin trying, perhaps for financial reasons, may find they are denied NHS help for their fertility problems.'

She added: 'These proposed changes represent a major step backwards for Wales and go against the direction of travel in the rest of the UK. England has said it is committed to removing obstacles to treatment for same-sex couples, as has Northern Ireland; Scotland has no barriers in place for same-sex couples. Northern Ireland has also committed to providing access for single women and more and more areas in England do. Women aged 40-42 can access NHS-funded IVF in Scotland, Northern Ireland and in some parts of England.'

'We urge WHSSC to think again about the drastic cuts it is proposing to NHS fertility treatment and we urge the public and stakeholders to respond to the consultation before 27 February 2023.'

You can respond to the public consultation at <https://whssc.nhs.wales/public-engagementconsultation/specialist-fertility-services/>

Single women:

Lucy is 38 and lives in Brecon. When Lucy's relationship ended during lockdown in 2020, she made the decision to try to conceive as a solo mum by choice. She has so far paid privately for 5 rounds of IUI and 1 natural IVF cycle; this has cost her £30,000. Under the current NHS fertility policy she can access NHS-funded IVF after 6 private IUI cycles; under the proposed new one she would be barred from accessing any NHS IVF.

Lucy says: 'I'm shocked at what a huge backwards step this would be. After my partner and I broke up during lockdown, I made the decision to try and have a baby on my own using an anonymous donor. I was 36 and didn't want to wait to meet someone new. I therefore paid privately for five rounds of IUI and one round of mild IVF. The private treatment has cost me about £30,000 and I still don't have a baby (or even any embryos frozen). I used every penny of my savings which were going to be used as a deposit on a house and I have also had to use credit cards (which I'm still paying off). The proposed new policy doesn't reflect the make-up of society nowadays - many women are single and making a proactive choice to have a baby on their own, and numerous people are in same sex relationships. If the guidelines change it is going to severely impact so many different people across Wales - single women will be taken out of the equation completely and same sex couples will have to have 12 rounds of IUI before they have any entitlement.'

Fertility preservation:

Sophie, 26, from Wales, has endometriosis and in a bid to preserve her fertility she paid £12,000 to freeze her eggs. However, under the proposed policy Sophie's forward-thinking actions on her health will mean that, if she needs help in the future to become a mum, she will be barred from accessing NHS help.

Sophie says: 'Having undergone four surgeries following my endometriosis diagnosis, I was told that infertility would be a real consequence in the future. Unfortunately, the NHS do not fund egg freezing for women with endometriosis for, and so I had to fund the treatment myself. It's meant using my house deposit to secure my future. To now learn that my family planning may now penalise me further, is absolutely heart breaking. Having a chronic condition is difficult enough as it is, but to be penalised for being proactive and self-funding treatment that I desperately need, is shameful.'

Same-sex couples:

Sarah (a pseudonym) is 36 and lives in Cardiff with her same-sex partner. They are hoping to become parents and are currently undergoing a second round of NHS-funded IVF, after trying to conceive at home using artificial insemination with a known donor without success for a year.

Sarah says: 'I am shocked and hugely disappointed to hear about the proposed policy changes in Wales regarding fertility treatment. I cannot understand why social infertility is not recognised in line with medical infertility and the impact this can have on wellbeing. Same-sex couples cannot conceive without some sort of intervention. Why is social infertility seen as an inferior form of infertility? No one chooses to be gay. No one chooses social infertility. Making it harder for same-sex couples will only result in more of them turning to the unregulated sperm donation community. This is an unregulated and constantly evolving community that serves a need for many people but also creates high levels of unnecessary risk.'

Women in their mid-to-late 30s plus:

Deborah (a pseudonym) is nearly 35. She has PCOS and has had four ectopic pregnancies, resulting in the removal of her Fallopian tubes. She now needs IVF if she is to conceive. Deborah had hoped to begin her IVF journey in Wales in summer 2022 but sadly her relationship ended. She desperately wants to be a mum.

Deborah says: 'I want more than anything to have the opportunity to carry, birth, nurture and love at least one of my natural children BUT when I'm physically / emotionally ready because I know full well that I have to be strong enough to enter the battlefield that is fertility. I am deeply concerned that the proposed changes denying NHS-funded fertility treatment to women aged 40-42 could prevent me from being able to become a biological mother.'

ENDS

Notes to editors:

Contact: Catherine Hill Fertility Network UK communications manager on 07469-660845 media@fertilitynetworkuk.org for interviews and case studies.

1. 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
2. Fertility Network UK provides a free and impartial Support Line open from 10am to 4pm. Mon, Wed and Fri: 0121 323 5025, support@fertilitynetworkuk.org Tues and Thurs: 07816 086694, janet@fertilitynetworkuk.org
3. Fertility Network UK supports people. We rely on voluntary donations to continue our vital work. You can donate now via text; text FNUK plus the donation amount to 70085. Or you can donate by visiting www.justgiving.com/fertilitynetwork