



Released: Tuesday 12th March 2024

World's first IVF clinic Bourn Hall partners with national charity Fertility Network UK to help more employers implement 'fertility fairness' in their workplace

The world's first IVF clinic, Bourn Hall, is joining forces with the UK's national fertility charity, Fertility Network UK, on their Fertility in the Workplace (FiTW) initiative, which helps firms support staff experiencing fertility struggles.

"One in six people have difficulties conceiving, and all are of working age. Infertility impacts both partners and can create devastating effects on all areas of their lives," **said Claire Heuclin, Fertility Network UK's FiTW coordinator.** "We are delighted Bourn Hall is partnering with us on our Fertility in the Workplace initiative."

A recent survey by Fertility Network and Fertifa showed that nearly eight out of ten (78%) people, who have experienced fertility issues, said that fertility support or a fertility policy was very important when they were considering a new job or employer.

Flexibility to attend appointments and promoting greater understanding of what fertility treatment involves are two practical ways in which a fertility policy can help employers provide a more supportive working environment and retain staff.

"If employers and managers are aware of what fertility treatments involve and what the outcomes can look like, they can better understand the associated stress and can create safe spaces for staff to talk in confidence," Claire continued.

Dr Thanos Papathanasiou, CEO and Medical Director of Bourn Hall, the world's first IVF clinic, said:

“Many people have little knowledge of infertility or how it is treated. As a fertility clinic we can bring this clinical knowledge to FiTW and we are deeply committed to supporting Fertility Network UK in delivering this programme.

“While it is important for employers to make adjustments to support their staff, there is also a role for fertility clinics to be more supportive of people balancing treatment with work – so patients can keep ‘under the radar’ and not disclose their treatment if they wish, or by recognising the need for more flexible appointment and protocols in order to minimise the impact on a patient’s working day.

“We talk to patients who don’t want to jeopardise their careers, so they are trying to make appointments and inject hormone medication in secret – all the while balancing a rollercoaster of emotions from hope to despair.

“Additionally, some types of work can evoke emotional triggers. We see patients in professions such as teaching, midwifery, and the police where they work closely with children, often in distressing situations – and their managers have no knowledge of their personal trauma.”

The Fertility in the Workplace initiative provides education and support packages to employers to help them develop pragmatic fertility policies that work for them and their staff, as well as providing effective signposting and wellbeing support.

It also offers 1:1 support to employees so that they understand their workplace rights and how to approach their employer.

Until March 2025, thanks to funding from the Department of Health, these support packages are provided free of charge to small and medium enterprises across England.

Fertility Network UK is also part of the Workplace Fertility Campaign Group convened by MP Nickie Aiken.

Nickie Aiken will be hosting a drop in event for MPs on March 13th at Westminster, to raise awareness of the Fertility Workplace Pledge, alongside her Private Members’ Bill, Fertility Treatment (Employment Rights) Bill, which would give employees a legal right to take time off for fertility appointments.

This event provides an opportunity for MPs to discuss this area of wellbeing at work. Dr Papathanasiou will be attending to provide insight into the clinical side of fertility treatments and Bourn Hall’s work with FiTW.

More information about Fertility in the Workplace and the Fertility Workplace Pledge can be found at fertilitynetworkuk.org/fertility-in-the-workplace

ENDS

Notes to editors:

Media contacts

Fertility Network contact: Claudia Congrave, Comms & content manager on 07494-991288 media@fertilitynetworkuk.org

Bourn Hall contact: For more information about Bourn Hall or to speak to a case study (see patient stories below) contact Claire Lynn, Holdsworth Associates PR consultants - Bourn Hall Clinic: Email: claire.lynn@holdsworth-associates.co.uk or phone 01954 202789

Patient experiences – support from employers is a lottery

Kelly:

Kelly from Cambridgeshire had kept working through lockdown and two losses from ectopic pregnancies, which can be life-threatening, but after her third loss the stress of coping became too much.

She says: “When I had my third loss I felt as though I was being pressured to go back to work, as though the loss didn't ‘matter’. Obviously, some people might find getting back to work is a distraction, but others need time to process the grief, so it is different for each person.”

Kelly was one of the first to have NHS IVF treatment at Bourn Hall when it was reinstated by the regional health authority. In her campaigning she met many others struggling with infertility.

“Infertility is a medical condition and people forget that,” she says. “You don't choose it. It causes no end of stress, it can boggle your brain.”

“Many people having fertility treatment are made to feel as though they are a ‘full on’ inconvenience to their work unless someone higher up in the company has been through it and is more sympathetic.

“There are simple things that employers can do such as allowing time off for an appointment and encouraging people with new babies to give a heads-up before they come in.

“Any awareness that can be raised amongst employers is a good thing. And it is being supportive of the logistics so for example a woman cannot drive for 24 hours after egg collection and shouldn't be left on their own so it is factoring that in that they wouldn't be able to drive to their office the next day and that their partner might need to work from home or be off work to be with them.”

Kelly felt so pressured to prioritise work over her recovery from her third loss that ultimately, she took the drastic step to resign before embarking on IVF.

"I thought there is no way I can go through IVF feeling this level of pressure from work," she says.

"We were entitled to one NHS-funded round, we had got this one chance and I needed to focus on getting as many eggs and embryos as we could, so in the end me and my husband just agreed to 'take the hit' financially and I quit my job.

"I was just so glad that the treatment was all I had to think about, not the fact that I 'should' be at work and whether my boss was going to ring me.

"I think what Fertility Network are doing to raise awareness of fertility in the workplace and supporting both employers and employees is fantastic. I didn't know about it at the time and it would have been really handy to give my boss some information so that he understood the process more and what support I might need."

Carlene:

For many years Carlene from Suffolk had experienced painful symptoms caused by endometriosis.

"I had a laparoscopy which revealed that I had a hydrosalpinx (fluid) on my left fallopian tube which needed removing but the adhesions caused by the endometriosis were so bad it was clipped instead," she says.

By that point Carlene, who is a civil servant, and her husband had been trying for a baby for five years and were told they would need fertility treatment.

"Once I knew that I was going to need IVF I looked on the civil service intranet and found they had a Fertility Policy," says Carlene. "I was entitled to paid time off for attending appointments, scans and the IVF itself and that really helped with taking some of the stress off for me.

"My boss was already aware of some of my issues because of my surgery and was really understanding and supportive.

"Bourn Hall gave me a schedule for my treatment so that worked well for planning around work as well.

"I know that some organisations lump fertility treatment in with policies that cover procedures like cosmetic surgery which I don't agree with at all. My employer locates it under the 'Health and

Disability' policies and also includes a link to Fertility Network's website which offers additional resources and support."

Carlene's IVF was successful at the second attempt and she is now mum to two-year-old Leo.

Carlene feels that it is not just employers and managers who have a role to play in making workplaces more 'fertility aware':

"When we were going through our fertility struggles I would get 'triggered' by everything," says Carlene. "I think we all have a role to play in being more aware and 'mindful' at work about the struggles that some people might be having. Something, such as a colleague bringing their new baby in to the office could be really upsetting for someone who might have experienced a miscarriage or had fertility issues."

About Fertility Network

1. Fertility Network UK provides practical and emotional support, 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. The Fertility in the Workplace initiative provides comprehensive support packages to employers to help them develop pragmatic fertility policies that work for them and their staff, as well as providing effective signposting and wellbeing support. It also offers 1:1 support to employees so that they understand their workplace rights and how to approach their employer. Until March 2025, thanks to funding from the Department of Health, these support packages are provided free of charge to small and medium enterprises across England. fertilitynetworkuk.org/fertility-in-the-workplace

3. 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

4. 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

About Bourn Hall Clinic www.bournhall.co.uk

Bourn Hall Clinic, the world's first and best-known assisted conception clinic, was established in 1980 by Patrick Steptoe, Robert Edwards and Jean Purdy, the pioneers of IVF, after their success with the first 'test-tube' baby Louise Brown.

Through innovative thinking the clinic maintains a leading role in the field, supporting both NHS and self-funding patients. It has full-service clinics in Cambridge, Norwich and Wickford and satellite clinics at Colchester, King's Lynn and Peterborough. Bourn Hall Clinic has also forged a partnership with the Luton and Dunstable Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.