

Freezing your fertility

Celia Dodd

Published at 12:00AM, April 18 2008

Kate Loosemore has decided to freeze her eggs - to prolong her natural fertility rather than for medical reasons. She is one of a handful of Britons who have done this, a group that has been vilified by the press as selfish career women, set on getting their own way, boyfriend or no boyfriend. "Picture the scene," wrote one tabloid last year, "high streets across the country filled with women in their fifties and sixties pushing buggies, a whole new generation of 'ice babies'."

But Loosemore is not a selfish woman putting off motherhood to climb the career ladder, she's a clinical nurse specialist who works with drug users in Doncaster. Loosemore, 34, has worked in the NHS all her working life.

"I love my job, but my career is not the reason I've put off having children," she says. "It just hasn't happened; the men I've had relationships with didn't want children when I wanted them. I've always wanted a family, but in the right circumstances. I'm so aware that being a parent is hard work and I've never felt I could do it on my own. Now I sometimes think that I may have been overcautious."

When she was younger Loosemore lived for five years with a man she expected to have children with but, when she was 27, they split up. She has a new partner, but he is recently divorced and it's too early to think about children; he has also had a vasectomy.

Eggs were frozen as an "insurance policy."

For nearly ten years it has been possible for women to ask fertility clinics to freeze their eggs (for a price) as an "insurance policy" against declining fertility. But, until recently, freezing techniques had such a low success rate, with only 15 to 20 per cent of eggs becoming fertilised, that it was a realistic option only for women with a medical imperative, such as cancer.

As a former midwife, Loosemore was well aware that the quality of her eggs could decline rapidly after her mid-thirties but didn't see egg freezing as feasible. But last year she heard about a new technique, Egg Vitrification Egg Storage (Eves), which was becoming available in some clinics. With the new technique, the success rate was said to be dramatically improved, with 85 to 90 per cent of eggs frozen by this method becoming fertilised.

The decision was made easier because she had already donated eggs once, for purely altruistic reasons, at a CARE Fertility clinic in Sheffield that also does Eves. So she was familiar with the procedures (which are the same for egg freezing) and she knew that she could produce a good number of healthy eggs (between 6 and 20). Women who donate eggs go through intensive testing, screening and counselling to make sure they are suitable, healthy and fertile. Only good-quality eggs are donated and frozen. Loosemore's

decision to freeze half her eggs and donate the rest was a small but significant step that she took in February. She has been advised to freeze one more batch of eggs when she donates again next year at the same clinic.

It's not something to be taken lightly

Simon Fishel, the managing director of the independent CARE Fertility clinics, has noticed that inquiries about egg freezing have recently increased from one or two a year to two or three a week. But his is one of only three clinics that have been granted a licence for Eves.

He says: "I see it as a potential safety net which, hopefully, women will never have to use. Time and again we see women who believe they will have a family when they want, but don't realise that if they have problems in their mid-thirties they could be in their late-thirties before they get the help they need. By then, the odds of them getting pregnant with their own eggs has dropped dramatically."

Egg freezing is not to be undertaken lightly. Like IVF, the treatment involves daily self-administered injections with ovulation-affecting drugs for about three weeks, regular monitoring and scans. The health implications for any baby born by the technique are also unknown. Loosemore's nursing background means she is skilled at giving injections and she experienced no side-effects from the drugs. Her mother went with her to the clinic to have the eggs harvested, which takes less than 30 minutes. Under sedation, a needle, guided by ultrasound, is inserted through the back of the vaginal wall.

Loosemore admits it was "a bit painful but no worse than an uncomfortable smear test". She hopes to use her eggs before her mid-forties, but she doesn't rule out having a baby without a partner. And if she gets pregnant naturally in the next couple of years, her eggs won't go to waste, they will be donated. Ironically, the woman to whom she donated eggs gave birth last month. But Loosemore doesn't feel the slightest envy: "I was so pleased when I was told. At the clinic I've seen so many couples who are desperate, and I've often felt like saying, 'I've got loads of eggs; you can have some of mine!' But you have to keep quiet.

THE LOWDOWN ON EGG FREEZING

What is it? In Egg Vitrification Egg Storage (Eves), the egg is dehydrated and then frozen more rapidly than conventional egg freezing. This prevents the formation of damaging ice crystals. Ten clinics in the UK offer egg freezing, usually for medical reasons. Only three - the Bridge Fertility Centre in London, the London Fertility Centre and Care Fertility - offer vitrification techniques as well.

Is there an age limit? Although the age limit for donating eggs is 36, some fertility experts believe that freezing eggs can be a sensible option for women up to the age of 38.

And the success rates? Using conventional techniques, about 200 women in the UK have had eggs frozen, mainly for medical reasons, each donating between 10 and 20

eggs. About 500 frozen eggs have been thawed for fertility treatment. Four babies have been born as a result, all using conventional freezing techniques. It is too early for equivalent figures on vitrification.

Are there any risks? Eves is still experimental and there are no guarantees that stored eggs will result in a live birth. The long-term health implications for children born from frozen eggs are unknown.

What does it cost? About £2,600. It can be less if eggs are donated.

www.CAREfertility.com ; www.hfea.gov.uk

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/families/article1853450.ece>