

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health and Aged Care

Standing Committee on Community Affairs

Inquiry into the Universal access to reproductive healthcare

28 February 2023

PDR Number: IQ23-000009

Costs and research associated with egg storage for patients

Spoken

Hansard page number: 54

Senator: Marielle Smith

Question:

ACTING CHAIR: We had some questions earlier about the storage of eggs. The government had an election commitment to look at subsidising the costs associated with egg storage for particular patients—I think patients at risk of cancer or genetic disease. Can you give us an update as to where the implementation of that commitment is at or what the next steps might be?

Ms Rishniw: That is the commitment to assisted reproductive services. I might need to take that one on notice. That election commitment is specifically looking at, as you mentioned, cancer patients.

ACTING CHAIR: I think it was about not passing on genetic disease as well.

Ms Rishniw: Yes, that's right, from 1 July this year.

ACTING CHAIR: I'm happy for you to take it on notice.

Ms Rishniw: Let me take it on notice and give you an update, but it's certainly an election commitment. It's due to commence on 1 July this year. I'll need to give you an update on where it's at in terms of implementation.

Ms Rishniw: That one I'll definitely need to take on notice, in part because it depends on the reason that you're storing eggs. It could be that it's a particular reproductive choice you're making, or as a result of treatment or infertility. Then there is whether it's privately stored and all of those factors. We'll come back to you on that.

ACTING CHAIR: Thanks. If there's any sort of work or research that you're doing that you can share or point us to, that would be helpful. We have not really discussed it much so far in the inquiry, but I think it is quite interesting. I think I can put anything else I have on notice.

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Answer:

The new program *Assisted Reproductive Technology Storage Funding* delivers on an election commitment published in the Government's *Plan for a Better Future*. Government confirmed funding for the program in the 2023-24 Budget. The program will begin on 1 July 2023 and introduces a payment of \$600 a year to subsidise the cost of storage of eggs, sperm, or embryos, for two patient groups faced with additional costs involved with preserving their fertility:

- people diagnosed with cancer
- people at risk of passing on genetic diseases or conditions who have undergone pre-implantation genetic testing funded by the Medicare Benefit Schedule (MBS)

Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) organisations with a current licence from the Reproductive Technology Accreditation Committee (RTAC) are eligible to receive payments for these services provided to eligible patients. Payments will be made directly to the ART organisation and out-of-pocket costs must not be charged to the eligible patients. Payments will be made in arrears for a 6-month payment period and the first payment period will be for the period 1 July to 31 December 2023.

The Australian Government is committed to health and medical research and will invest in Australian research and its translation into practice to ensure Australia's entire health system is prepared for current and future challenges.

The Government provides direct support for health and medical research through the complementary Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

As at 31 December 2022, the MRFF has invested \$192.30 million in 90 grants with a focus on women's and men's health research. Of these 90 grants, \$166.05 million has been invested in 79 grants with a focus on or related to sexual and reproductive health research – a number of these projects involve research on IVF, which can include freezing of embryos. For example:

- A grant of \$4.6 million has been awarded to the University of New South Wales for the 'Causes and prevention of male infertility' project (MAIL project). The project applies advanced epidemiological and analytical techniques to answer key questions in male reproductive health. Translation activities include a publicly available online IVF patient predictor tool allowing individuals to estimate their chances of successful treatment, clinical practice guidelines and a clinical trials portal.
- A grant of \$2.9 million has been awarded to the University of Melbourne for The Australian New Zealand Oncofertility Clinical Trials Network' study. The project will enable wide-scale implementation of new digital tools, guidance and models of oncofertility care across 9 Australian New Zealand Haematology Oncology (ANZCHOG) cancer centres in order to raise benchmarks of patient-centred oncofertility care. Families will be involved in discussions about the risks to fertility, and potential fertility preservation options (freezing of eggs, sperm or gonadal tissue) in the critical window between cancer diagnosis and cancer treatment. The project will offer clinicians new models of care and young cancer survivors the chance of future parenthood.

The Government continues to invest in sexual and reproductive health research and an additional \$15 million was announced on 13 March 2023 for the Mitochondrial Donation Pilot Program, mitoHOPE. Through this funding, Monash University's project aims to assist women to have biological children who do not inherit the predisposition to mitochondrial disease and help determine the best way to safely offer mitochondrial donation (which includes IVF) to Australian women with the disease.

Below is a summary of other recent Commonwealth-funded research projects relating more broadly to fertility preservation and IVF:

| Topic | Funding source & amount | Funding timeframe | Research focus |
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| Research into improving embryo transfer success rates | NHMRC, \$347, 035 | Jan 2019 – Dec 2020 | Measurement of six proteins in the blood to predict if the mother's body is ready to accept and nurture an embryo. |
| Uterine shield to improve IVF uterine receptivity | NHMRC, \$817,063 | Jan 2019 – Dec 2021 | Investigate a novel uterine shield controlling human uterine receptivity and its clinical application in improving IVF success rates |
| Randomised control trial of decision tool for women considering egg freezing | NHMRC, \$593,043 | Jan 2019 – Dec 2021 | Deciding whether to freeze eggs is complex and Decision Aids (DA) are the best way to support informed choice. Developed a DA for women considering egg freezing and will test this using a randomised controlled trial. |
| New antifreeze molecules for cryopreservation | Australian Research Council, \$380,000 | May 2019 – Apr 2022 | Use state-of-the-art experimental methods and advanced phase-field modelling techniques to optimise cryoprotectants so that they reduce osmotic stress in cells and inhibit ice crystal growth during freezing and thawing. |

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| Cancer risk in women and children post-IVF | NHMRC, \$1,025,422 | Jan 2019 – Dec 2023 | Examine the evidence for 690,000 Australian women and 220,000 children post-IVF to establish if they are at any increased risk of cancer. |
| Improved outcomes with novel medications in early IVF-assisted pregnancy | NHMRC, \$592,259 | Jan 2020 – Dec 2022 | Establish the safety of these medications and their impact on maternal and childhood outcomes. |
| Enhancement of embryo formation in ART | NHMRC, \$660,133 | Jan 2021 – Dec 2023 | Develop new compounds that improve embryo growth in the clinic, which will improve IVF success rates |
| Improve diagnosis of embryo health | NHMRC, \$1,266,777 | Jan 2021 – Dec 2023 | Use imaging to determine the ratio of abnormal: normal cells resulting in a non-invasive diagnostic that will improve IVF success. |
| Efficacy of IVF add-ons | NHMRC, \$645,205 | Jan 2021 – Dec 2025 | Research to measure use of IVF add-ons in Australia, which aim to increase the chance of success of IVF, and the factors that drive supply and demand. |
| Management of the YourIVFSuccess Website | Department of Health and Aged Care, \$1,430,000 | Jun 2022 – Jun 2023 | Ongoing management and updating of the YourIVFSuccess website, and the YourIVFSuccess estimator |
| Improving infertility treatment | NHMRC, \$846, 532 | Jan 2022 – Dec 2025 | Develop a new set of drugs that target ovarian growth factors to treat or prevent infertility. |
| Reducing the psychosocial burden of infertility treatment | NHMRC, \$652,078 | Jan 2023 – Dec 2025 | Generate new evidence on how coping, social support and mood change across an IVF cycle, produce an online coping intervention for patients and information resources for partners and families. |