

National Fertility Preservation Register: database to help cancer patients with fertility issues

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Time to act ... Jane McNab decided to freeze her eggs after being diagnosed with cancer at the age of 24. Picture: Eugene Hyland Source: News Corp Australia

DISCOVERING they have cancer is a big enough blow for a young person, but only half are getting access to services to preserve their fertility from the treatment.

A new database is being built to monitor and report on male and female cancer survivors and experts hope it will help quantify their risk of ovarian or testicular failure.

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Fertility specialist Associate Professor Kate Stern says about one in every 570 Australian women and one in 490 men of reproductive age are affected each year by various forms of cancer.

“From experience within our own unit, about 50 per cent of young patients undergoing treatment for breast cancer are referred to discuss fertility preservation options,” she said



Preventive ... Angelina Jolie, who had a double mastectomy after discovering she carried the BRCA1 cancer gene, may have surgery in the future to prevent ovarian cancer. Source: AP

There is very little long-term data on the effect of cancer treatment on reproduction or the outcomes for those who seek fertility treatment.

But women who undergo cancer treatment can have their ovaries damaged by chemotherapy or radiotherapy, they may need their ovaries removed or there may be damage to the uterus or fallopian tubes from surgery or radiotherapy.



Public awareness ... Kate Stern says cancer patients who freeze their eggs are just as likely to conceive as other patients undergoing treatment for infertility. Source: News Limited

In men, cancer surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment can damage the glands or organs that control fertility or alter the part of the brain that controls the endocrine system causing temporary or permanent infertility.

“There are measures that can be taken to preserve fertility for these patients and one of the major challenges is to improve public awareness of those options, and their chances of success,” Professor Stern said.

“In egg freezing, it has been shown that cancer patients have a similar rate of success in achieving pregnancies as other patients undergoing treatment for infertility,” the Melbourne IVF expert said.

Jane McNab was just 24 and had only just graduated from University in Melbourne when she was diagnosed with a fast-growing breast cancer. She was referred for fertility counselling by her oncologist.

“I was in a relationship but had certainly not thought about having a child at all. I thought that was something I’d do after I was 30,” she said.

After a “heavy” conversation with her partner she decided to freeze some of her eggs before cancer treatment.

Like Hollywood actor Angelina Jolie, who had a double mastectomy after discovering she carried the BRCA1 cancer gene, Ms McNab will have to decide in the future whether to have preventive surgery for ovarian cancer.

“That’s given me a time frame for a family and now I feel pressured, I’ve got to do it sooner rather than later,” she said.



Fertility risk ... women who undergo cancer treatment can have their ovaries damaged by chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Source: News Limited

Jane says she's a fan of the proposed cancer fertility database because it will ensure records are kept in a central place.

Before they commence cancer treatment women can opt to preserve their fertility by using IVF to harvest mature eggs from their ovaries and have them frozen for later use.

Alternatively eggs can be harvested and fertilised by sperm and the resulting embryos can be frozen for later use.

Women can also opt for a new treatment where ovarian tissue is removed, frozen and implanted back in the body after cancer treatment to generate the growth of new eggs. Thirty three babies have been born worldwide using this technique, Professor Stern says.

In men, sperm can be collected and frozen for later use in IVF.

It is critical that oncologists are aware of the fertility preservation treatments and refer their patients quickly where there is an immediate need to start cancer treatment," Professor Stern said.

The National Fertility Preservation Register will be housed and managed independently within the University of New South Wales.

<http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/health/national-fertility-preservation-register-database-to-help-cancer-patients-with-fertility-issues/story-fneuz9ev-1226890664683>

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