

The Proactive Fertility Care Industry Is Soaring. Is that a Good Thing?

By Katie Bishop, *BBC*, December 7th, 2023

A few years ago, Elizabeth King, a fertility coach and counsellor based in Los Angeles, noticed a change in the clientele contacting her for help. Previously, King had mostly supported women going through infertility and pregnancy loss, but she increasingly found people were reaching out for information about their fertility, long before they began trying to conceive.

"Many of these clients come in with concerns about their age, medical history and often information they've gathered from various media," says King. "The common thread among them is the desire for reassurance and control over their reproductive choices."

In almost all countries worldwide, the age women are having children has dramatically increased. Researchers suggest that in the Western world economic uncertainty, limited housing availability and increased labour-market participation among women contribute to people delaying childbearing.

For many, the rise of proactive fertility treatments means increased freedom around reproductive choices. For individuals who don't feel ready or able to have a child, these services offer a way to make informed choices that may improve chances of future conception. For some, the benefits may be as simple as alleviating anxieties around fertility in a world where women's "biological clocks" are an oft-cited worry.

King says these services have many benefits, but she also has concerns about their use. For some people, she believes, they can instill a false sense of security. For instance, although most proactive fertility care is targeted at and marketed towards women, it is estimated that around 40% to 50% of infertility cases are due to "male-factor infertility" – often caused by low sperm concentration or poor sperm mobility. This has led to fears that some proactive fertility companies are preying on heightened fears about infertility among women in their marketing.

Some experts also have concerns about the profit-driven nature of the proactive fertility industry. Kavelle Christie, the director of the Gender Equity and Health Justice Program at health-advocacy group Community Catalyst, argues that the cost of acting on any information is often hugely expensive.

"The fertility industry is a multibillion dollar one, and pre-emptive fertility treatments, unfortunately, like many other areas in healthcare, are often driven by profit instead of patient-centred care," she says. "The prohibitively high out-of-pocket costs associated with these services often prevent people from acting on any information or questions about their health, contributing to an accessibility gap."

The average cost of an egg-freezing cycle and thawing currently sits at around £7,000 to £8,000 in the UK, and \$8,000 to \$15,000 in the US. Increasingly, this cost has driven workplaces to offer egg freezing as a workplace perk, with companies such as Apple and Facebook funding up to \$20,000 worth of egg freezing. This means that many proactive fertility services are the preserve of the wealthy or those employed by large and well-resourced corporations, and Christie says that low-income individuals and those living in rural communities where healthcare is hard to access are often excluded from the advances in fertility care.