Reviewer's report

Title: The decision-making process for the fate of frozen embryos by Japanese infertile women: a qualitative study

Version: 1 Date: 20 May 2011

Reviewer: Robert Sparrow

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This is a valuable addition to the literature on patient decision-making in the context of reproductive technologies. It addresses a well-defined question with appropriate methods. The quality of the manuscript is high and the discussion and conclusions are adequately supported by the data. The paper is well written and appropriately referenced. The description of the five stages of the decision-making processes of the study’s subjects, when they were considering choices about embryo storage and donation, and the discussion of the influence of the culturally specific values of Japanese patients on their decisions are both likely to be of interest to other researchers in the field.

Minor Essential Revisions

1) Page 5, 2nd line of first sentence of paragraph under the heading “participants”: replace “and had” with “and to have” (grammar)

2) Page 19, first sentence of first paragraph: Replace “the psychological burden to continue storage” with “the psychological burden involved in continuing storage” (grammar/expression)

3) Page 19, fourth sentence of first paragraph under the heading “Step 4: Partner’s opinion confirmed”. Insert “wish” between “the same time” and “some characterising”

4) Page 30, table 1, dot point no. 6. Replace “steak” with “stake”.

Discretionary Revisions

5) Page 6: the authors might wish to explain the reference of the term “new-cult” for those not familiar with this description.

6) Page 8: the structure of the sentence “partner’s opinion was confirmed; separating those who continued from those who discontinued storage” is slightly awkward and obscures the meaning of the claim here. Thus the authors might consider rewriting this short passage.

7) A number of minor edits and clarifications would, I believe, greatly improve the current discussion of the first two steps of the patients’ decision-making processes; I would strongly encourage the authors to consider these.

a) To begin with, what is meant by the embryo transfer moratorium being “sustained” is not immediately obvious. From the context it is clear that what the authors intend is that the patients did not want to transfer the embryo into the woman’s uterus—in the short term at least—as a response to the arrival of the
letter of notification. Thus it might improve this section of the discussion if the step was described as “Option to implant embryo immediately was rejected”. Similarly, the phrase on page 8, “leaving the embryo to be transferred to the uterus in moratorium” is perhaps not as clear as one might desire. Presumably it is the decision about transfer to the uterus that is being deferred rather than the embryo itself, given that one of the later choices that some patients make is to discard the embryos.

b) The description at the bottom of page 9 of the embryos being “found worthy of transfer and storage” risks confusing the reader given that, according to the flowchart in figure 1, later decision points still maintain the option of discarding the embryo. Thus perhaps it would be better to describe the decision here as “the value of the embryo was affirmed and the desire expressed to store it with the hope of future transfer if possible”? (The later description on page 11 of Mottainai embryos as “worthy of transfer and storage” suggests this reading, although the conjunction “transfer and storage”, still makes it appear as though the decision to store is always necessarily also a decision to have another child in the future). Alternatively, the flowchart in figure 1 should be amended if in fact some participants did proceed immediately from this consideration to the decision to store the embryos.

c) Similarly, the description at the top of page 10, that the participants “then considered having another child” should make it clear that this was a decision about the desirability of having another child “in the future”.

It is my belief that some minor clarifications or edits in these passages would greatly improve the clarity of this description of the results of the study as a whole.

8) Page 18, first paragraph under the heading “Mottainai embryo”: “Nuanced” might serve better than “delicately expressed”.

9) The “discussion” only treats some steps of the decision-making process and does so under the same headings as were introduced in the description of the results. This risks conveying the (false) impression that the discussion is replicating material already contained in the results. Adding a short introduction as to why the authors have discussed some steps and not others, and (possibly) revising the phrasing of the headings here, would address this issue.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have received funding for travel to Japan (from Australia) and accommodation
in Tokyo, from the University of Tokyo Center for Biomedical Ethics and Law, with which several of the authors are associated, in order to attend the Global Alliance of Biomedical Ethics Centers Conference in 2009, 2010, and 2011.