Reviewer’s report

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

Version: 1 Date: 11 July 2011

Reviewer: Kathryn Ehrich

Reviewer’s report:

This is an interesting and original paper and provides data that will be relevant to an international audience interested in this topic area. I have made suggestions for improvement below. I found some of the points particularly intriguing and I will indicate below where some elaboration would be welcome. I hope these comments are helpful.

- Major Compulsory Revisions

The main comment I have on improving this paper is that the way it is currently organised needs to be revised. It is probably easier for the reader to understand the basis of the model if the themes are reported on first, which may not correspond exactly to the steps in the model. The current version, which incorporates all the thematic analysis in terms of the model, possibly closes down the thematic discussion too early and some of the points are lost or seem to be oddly placed. I think a thematic presentation of the findings could then be followed with the model, with much less discussion there, because we would understand where it has come from.

There are some further studies specifically from Japan that I feel the authors should be aware of, especially since they are writing on the basis of their work in just one clinic. From my work in the UK, I have seen that treatment policies in different clinics can make a big difference, for example on the question of how many embryos may be stored and for how long. The authors could start with:


That article has some other relevant references worth following up.

A further point is that there is not much discussion of ethics here, and the journal readers might expect a bit more. The authors also need to clarify what ethical issues they are addressing. For example, the article is about decision-making primarily (if I understand correctly) at the storage reminder point, and how the meanings for couples of the stored embryos, and disposal, inform these
decisions. It seems to me not so much about informed consent (the obvious ethical issue), but feelings about embryos once they have been in storage. As the authors have pointed out, these feelings are likely to be quite different when the time comes to make a decision about stored embryos (possibly after having had a child), compared to the time when they need to sign initial consent forms about embryos during treatment. I don’t think this is a reason not to include the article in the journal, but the ethical points need some signposting and clarification.

- Minor Essential Revisions

The paper could do with some editorial attention as there are quite a few places where the grammar is slightly unclear and there are some spelling mistakes (e.g. rage / range, brake / break).

- Discretionary Revisions

These are recommendations for improvement, or clarification, that would be useful but can be left to the authors to decide upon.

Background section:
Para 2: How is the end of the woman’s reproductive life determined and defined? Can you say anything about why Japan prohibits embryo donation to other infertile couples?
Para 4: Might men also feel constrained to speak openly in front of their partner? The authors point out that patients often change their decision at a later stage and this point needs to be addressed more carefully in this paper (see comments above).
Para 5: Point about other qualitative papers being about patients with Christian affiliated backgrounds – are the authors sure about this or are they making assumptions? See the Kato paper.

Methods section:
General point – I am unclear about the characteristics of the sample in terms of whether the patients have not been successful with IVF at all, or have and therefore have at least one child, or have an existing child but not through IVF. Could you do a little table setting the characteristics of your sample and include these? This point comes up again in the results section generally.

Results:
Step 1: “Eagerness towards pregnancy and expectations towards the embryo are decreased, compared with behaviour during treatment.” This is a fascinating finding – do you have any quotes to illustrate this or could you say more from your observations, e.g. the point about work etc. taking priority?
The quote at the end of this section seems to be more about the end of storage forcing a decision.
Step 2: This seems to be the real heart of the article, and if the authors decide to
restructure, I think this section might contain more than one theme. For example, there are some very interesting points here (and in Step 5) about stigma and spoiled identity, of both the stored embryo and the woman as well.

Step 4: This section also had some interesting topics that could be separated out and are not captured by the overall heading. For example, the second quote seems to be about storage as the embodiment of a stalemate between the man and woman as to whether or not to go ahead with transfer.

Step 5: The embryo as the embodiment of the woman's experience and work of IVF is a very interesting theme.

Underlying Theme: As already suggested, I think the themes should be presented first, and the material in this section should be incorporated there.

The quote about continuing storage until death was astonishing. How did participants envisage this in a practical and ethical sense?

Discussion:

The structuring of the discussion could follow a brief section presenting the model. Then it would be possible to discuss the model in relation to the themes presented, and the wider literature you have here, and also incorporate further Japanese specific literature.

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests