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5<sup>th</sup> October 2020

The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
(Via email)

Dear Secretary of State,

We write today as a coalition of charities, professional bodies and patient organisations to urge you to **safeguard fertility patients' access to fertility treatments** during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there have been commitments at a national level to extend patient age limits, to ensure patients will remain eligible for NHS-funded care despite the delays caused by the pandemic. However, the same is yet to happen in England. We know that you are a strong supporter of fertility patients' access to treatment, and we hope you will therefore be willing to take decisive steps towards preserving patients' eligibility for care.

As you are aware, on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) instructed fertility clinics to cease providing services. In May 2020 the HFEA issued a second General Direction inviting clinics to apply to re-open, and almost all have now been authorised to do so. This is welcome news and we were pleased to see that you ensured fertility clinics were able to re-open as soon as it was safe after the initial closures. However, many of these clinics are still operating a reduced service, and **fertility patients continue to face long delays.**

These delays are distressing for all patients, regardless of their age. A recent survey of fertility patients conducted by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) found that patients reported feeling worried (78%), upset (78%), tense (55%) and nervous (46%) during the time that clinics were closed, with more than 50% reporting bad or very bad sleep during that period.

*“It affected my work as a nurse massively as it exacerbated my anxiety. I felt like I was living my life on pause whilst the media were joking about a 'baby boom'. Even when clinics resumed the uncertainty around when our treatment would start was exhausting.”*

*“We were days away from egg collection so it felt awful. Almost like someone had swept the air from within me. We got told we would be carrying on, then we could have collection but freeze all then full cancellation all within 2 hours. It was heartbreaking.”*

*“I had waited to start IVF. I was desperate to be trying to conceive. After 3 miscarriages all I wanted was my baby. Not being able to do anything towards that goal broke me.”*

**However, without action, there is a danger that some patients will be disproportionately impacted by these distressing delays, and may miss out on treatment altogether.** In England, individual CCGs impose their own upper age limits on fertility funding, which according to a recent report from BPAS range from 34 to 42 for female patients. **Due to delays caused by the pandemic, several patients now risk crossing these age thresholds and becoming ineligible for NHS-funded fertility care.**

**In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, guidance has been issued by the devolved administrations to advise fertility clinics to “stop the clock” for fertility patients,** affording them several extra months of eligibility to account for the pandemic-related delays. In England, however, this decision is made at the level of CCGs, contributing to the IVF postcode lottery that already exists between different areas. As a result, Freedom of Information requests submitted in September have revealed that CCGs are adopting different approaches, with some offering extensions and others stating that no exceptions to the age limit will be made.

Patients in England are thus subject to a postcode lottery on this issue, while those in other regions of the UK can at least be reassured that they will not run out of time to access NHS-funded care due to the pandemic. **We therefore write today to urge you to reassure fertility patients, no matter where they live, by issuing guidance to CCGs that patients who have crossed an age threshold during the pandemic should still be considered eligible for treatment.**

This approach is supported by the HFEA, which has stated:

*“While we have no remit over funding, we hope that those relying on NHS funding will be allowed to continue their treatment as they expected. We know that the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have committed to ensure that patients are not disadvantaged by the pandemic. The situation has yet to be clarified in England where the patient charity Fertility Network UK is actively trying to ascertain the situation.”*

It is also supported by fertility patients: 95% of those surveyed stated they agreed or strongly agreed that fertility clinics in England should “stop the clock” for fertility patients, to allow them to complete their treatment in spite of the delays caused by COVID-19.

Some of the respondents also spoke about the personal impact of the delays on their wellbeing:

*“I am frightened I may miss my opportunity. I am getting older and time is not on my side.”*

*“It’s had an extremely negative impact to my mental health. I constantly feel the clock ticking away on my fertility.”*

*“It’s been absolutely devastating. I understand the pandemic makes things hard, but it’s even harder when your hopes and dreams are taken away.”*

*“I’m very concerned about the age limit. I have a cyst on my ovary, this is causing me extreme pain as well as impacting my fertility. [...] I need surgery before I try IVF. I’m not sure when my surgery will take place and they will make me wait at least a year trying naturally before referring me for IVF. I feel extremely let down.”*

We urge you to do the right thing by these patients, and issue guidance to CCGs to “stop the clock” without delay.

Yours sincerely,

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Dr. Edward Morris, President, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG)  
Gwenda Burns, Chief Executive, Fertility Network UK  
Sarah Norcross, Director, Progress Educational Trust  
Professor Jason Kasraie, Chair, Association of Reproductive and Clinical Scientists  
Kelly da Silva, Founder, The Dovecote: Childless Support Organisation  
Dr. Emily Scott, Founder, IVF Fairness  
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Katy Lindemann, Founder, Uber Barrens Club  
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