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Project Title: Egg freezing for future fertility: how do women engaging in non-medical 'egg freezing' conceptualise their stored oocytes, and why does it matter?

This project aims primarily to explore how women who engage in technologies to 'freeze' their oocytes for social reasons (as opposed to medical reasons such as surgical treatment for cancer) conceptualise their frozen eggs. The project is a pilot study, and a secondary aim is to help in assessing the feasibility of a full-scale study; whether the research protocol is realistic and workable, and to inform applications for future funding of a larger study. The findings of this project, and more especially the larger project that I plan to develop from it, will potentially inform further research, public debate and understandings around the practice of egg freezing, and policy, and practice in this area, both nationally and internationally.

The project is a development of my doctoral study in which I explored the experience of 'circumstantial childlessness'; that is, women who saw themselves as having a biological child at some point in their lives but found themselves in their late 30s/early 40s without having done so for, initially at least, social rather than biological reasons. I found these women to have vivid—and very private—fantasies of themselves as a mother, and of the child(ren) they hoped to bear long before they became pregnant, and these 'dreams' had material effects on their daily lives. This population of women is actively targeted by those who promote oocyte vitrification or 'egg freezing' as a 'solution' to the problem of women's eggs aging in their 30s when many women want or need to keep working, or have not found someone with whom they want to share raising a child.

Egg freezing is very expensive and invasive, and does not guarantee a later pregnancy, but women who want to keep the option of conceiving a child when their natural fertility has declined are increasingly taking up this option. Internationally, large companies such as Facebook and Google and the US military now make egg freezing part of their health packages for senior staff. Fertility services in Aotearoa/NZ have already seen a greater uptake and expect a significant increase in demand for elective egg freezing as the process becomes better known and the technology continues to improve.

Previous study has investigated the meaning the *process* of egg freezing holds for women (Waldby 2014) and found it to be one of "banking time". The proposed study will take a step back to an exploration of women's conceptualisation of their stored

eggs, prior to fertilization. It will explore the meanings and emotional investments that are held for women in their eggs, how these meanings relate to possible fantasies of motherhood and a child, and what the potential implications are for women's wellbeing and for later donation or disposal of unused oocytes when the legal storage time has elapsed. It will have wider implications for women's wellbeing, policy and practice in the development of reproductive technologies, and whanau formation and functioning.

This study will entail the use of participant-produced drawing methods alongside semi-structured interviews in order to capture elements of women's experiences that are difficult to articulate in language. This is a significantly different and effective way of approaching research in this area that I have found to be effective in my previous doctoral study.

The study is possible through the generous support of the Auckland Medical Aid Trust.