Reproductive ageing
Since 1973 the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has regularly convened Study Groups to address important growth areas within obstetrics and gynaecology. An international group of eminent clinicians and scientists from various disciplines is invited to present the results of recent research and to take part in in-depth discussions. The resulting volume, containing enhanced versions of the papers presented, is published within a few months of the meeting and provides a summary of the subject that is both authoritative and up to date.

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Reproductive ageing

Edited by

Susan Bewley, William Ledger and Dimitrios Nikolaou
The Editors would like to thank Mr Douglas Gibb and Merck Serono for their unrestricted grant in support of the recording and transcription of the discussants' comments. These appear at the end of each section and, we think, explore and broaden the authors' contributions.

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DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST

All contributors to the Study Group were invited to make a specific Declaration of Interest in relation to the subject of the Study Group. This was undertaken and all contributors complied with this request.

David Barlow has received sponsorship or paid consultancy work from Novo Nordisk, PregLem Pfizer and Wyeth. He holds shares of nominal value in PregLem. He is the Dean of Medicine at Glasgow University, which receives grants from a wide range of companies. He is an officer or member of the British Menopause Society, the National Osteoporosis Society, the European Menopause and Andropause Society and the RCOG. He was Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Human Reproduction* until 2007. Susan Bewley was paid for consultancy work in 2008 by RAND Organisation and is a member of the Medical Defence Union (MDU) Council and the National Childbirth Trust. She receives small royalties as editor of the OUP textbook *Training in Obstetrics and Gynaecology*. Peter Braude’s department receives financial support from Merck Serono, Organon and Hologic. He is a consultant to or member of the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO), the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) and the Multiple Births Stakeholder Group. His department holds four patents related to premature labour. Kate Brian is a member of the board of trustees of Infertility Network UK (INUK) and is the author of *The Complete Guide to Female Fertility* and *The Complete Guide to IVF*. Catherine Coulson’s department has received educational grants from Organon and Merck Serono and she is a consultant to the British Society of Psychosomatic Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Andrology. She is a Member of the Institute of Psychosexual Medicine and a member of the British Fertility Society. Melanie Davies is lead investigator for a research project sponsored by Organon. She has received limited editorial fees for two books that are in print. Roger Gosden has occasionally received honoraria for conference lectures. His department has received grants for research from EMD Serono and Ferring Pharmaceuticals and he is an unpaid consultant for Fertile Hope (New York) and for the Diamond Foundation, which are both non-profit organisations. Berkeley Greenwood is a consultant to the National Infertility Awareness Campaign (NIAC), which receives sponsorship from commercial organisations. Stephen Hillier has in the past received lecture fees or honoraria from Serono, Organon and Ferring. He has authored two patents but does not own them now. Stijn Hoorens has declared that RAND Europe has received research grants from Ferring Pharmaceuticals and Organon. RAND Europe has policies and contractual arrangements to safeguard the independence and objectivity of its research. Sean Kehoe has acted as an adviser for Sanofi Pasteur and received support to attend educational meetings. He is a council member of the British Gynaecological Cancer Society, a member of the NCRJ Ovarian Subgroup and the British Society For Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology, a spokesperson for WOW, a trustee for OVACOME and an editorial board member of *BJOG*, the European Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and the European Journal of Surgical Oncology. William Ledger has received honoraria for lecturing/teaching from Schering Plough and Amiral. His department receives research funding for commercial studies from Akzo Nobel, Ferring, Schering Plough and Ipsen. He is a consultant to Verity – the PCOS charity, the National Infertility Awareness Campaign and the Pituitary Foundation. He has received payment for work as an Editorial Board Member of Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Reproductive Medicine. Dimitrios Nikolaou has been sponsored by Ferring and Serono to attend scientific meetings (less than £5,000 per year). His wife has some shares in Pfizer. His unit is sponsored for research by Ferring and Serono. Helen Paxton’s research group has received funding for research from industry for clinical trials and basic research. None of these projects would constitute a conflict of interest on this topic. She is the current Chair of the Society for Reproduction and Fertility, which is a basic science society as well as a charity. Lucinda Veeck Gosden’s department has received grants for research from EMD Serono and Ferring Pharmaceuticals. Herman Tournaye’s department receives financial support from all major gonadotrophin companies (Ferring, Serono, Organon).
Infertility and miscarriage

Such hope.
And then the rain
Comes again.

I am angry,
I am frustrated,
I cry,
I am frustrated with the world,
But most of all,
I am frustrated with myself,
Although doctors frustrate me
A great deal.

In my head
I know I am not to blame,
In my heart,
I don’t know who else there is.

Involuntary childlessness
Is like walking around
With an invisible limb missing.

When I leave my fertile years behind me
Will I finally be able to let it all go?
Or will the next generation
Appear to haunt me still?

Treatment

Courage is not
The absence of fear,
But rather
The ability to act
In the face of it

They say,
Infertility is as stressful
As cancer.
How many people know that?

Stereotypes

I am not a mother,
But nor am I
A career woman
Or over forty,
But if I was,
Should I be judged
For using my brain, my talents
And forging a successful career?
Should I be criticised
For finding unsuccessful relationships
And for not finding Mr Right?
After all, it takes two
To make a baby and create a family.
And some people genuinely believe
That stability and life experience
Are factors in bringing up children,
Contrary to popular opinion,
Not all women consciously think
I’ll be OK, no matter what,
Let me choose where the kids will fit in,
There’s always the easy option of
Fertility Treatment and IVF
With their gilt-edged guarantees.
I can always buy
An egg, sperm, embryo, a baby.
No. It is not thoughtlessness that delays
The decision to have a family,
Far from it,
For the majority, it is life.

Darwin and his gene pool suck.
All I can hope
Is that evolution adapts,
And men start having babies too,
Which will not only benefit infertile women,
But also the work place, society
And the world in general.

Afterwards

I chase
Single magpies
Out of the garden

© Kate Bentley
Ageing can be welcomed, endured or feared but it remains inevitable. Obstetricians and gynaecologists are uniquely placed to see and to alleviate the complications of diseases of pregnancy and the reproductive organs. They have to be knowledgeable and skilled in their broad or subspecialist expert areas in order to provide high-quality medical services to women. They have an understanding of how age affects biology and disease, particularly when the population is ageing and in an era of deferred childbearing. They also have to respect and understand the complex lives that women lead and the diverse families and communities they come from, and be sensitive to the impact that obstetric and gynaecological problems may have. Our histories, examinations, tests, diagnoses and prognoses can threaten the core of a woman’s identity and her fertility, sexuality, family and life experiences. Doctors have to avoid stereotypes and empathise with and listen to their patients but cannot always ‘walk in another’s shoes’. The poems opposite distil some of the private pain and public pleas of women experiencing the adverse effects of reproductive ageing.

Since 1973, the RCOG has regularly convened Study Groups to address important topics in our specialty. Ageing and reproductive ageing affect us all as individuals and as society. Obstetricians and gynaecologists are witnesses to the impact of reproductive ageing and to some of the fears, misinformation and misapprehensions that the general public have. One purpose of the Study Group was to raise awareness of the societal trends and implications. Practitioners, academics and informed lay contributors from around the world were brought together to look at the current situation and available evidence. The wider importance of the subject to the whole of society is emphasised by the contributions in this volume from experts from other disciplines, both within and outside medicine. Reproductive ageing has effects on individual and public health, now and in generations to come. It is experienced differently by different cultures, by the voluntarily and involuntarily childless and by those responsible for organising health services. Although women are healthier than ever, biology can still determine destiny and the decline in fertility and rise in complications with age remain. Scientists can understand but cannot yet control or reverse the processes of ageing, even as they contribute to the means of alleviating the suffering that it may bring. This volume gathers together a diverse but timely set of contributions in order to inform Members and Fellows of the RCOG, interested healthcare and research workers and the general public.

We are greatly indebted to the participants who provided their manuscripts on time and who worked so hard during the Study Group. As always, the RCOG staff made the behind-the-scenes work run smoothly and contributed to the success of the meeting. In particular, we would like to thank Jessica Letters, Andrew Welsh and Jane Moody. The Study Group participants wanted to celebrate the positive aspects of ageing, not stigmatise older women. We enjoyed ourselves and hope that those who read the book, and especially the stimulating discussions, will do so too.

Susan Bewley
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Dimitrios Nikolaou
Sean Kehoe