

Contents

Contributors

Preface

1. History and epidemiology of human fertility

HASSAN N. SALLAM AND NOOMAN H. SALLAM

Fertility in the ancient world	1
Fertility in the post-Renaissance era	2
Fertility in modern times	2
The hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis	2
The gonadotrophins	4
Gonadal steroids	4
Immuno-assays and the female hormonal interplay	5
Other milestones in the history of fertility	5
The IVF revolution	5
Further developments in assisted reproduction	5
The story of ICSI	6
Embryo selection, fertility preservation, and the future	6
Epidemiology of human fertility	6
Normal fertility patterns and the definition of infertility	6
Prevalence of infertility	6
Seeking infertility treatment	7
Factors affecting the success of infertility treatment	7
Burden of infertility	8
Access to infertility services	8
References	9

2. Setting up an ART unit: planning, design, and organization

DOMENICO BALDINI, ISABELLA COBUZZI, AND GIORGIO MARIA BALDINI

Planning	11
Design and building	12
Materials	14
Installations	15
Ergonomics and flows	18
References	23

3. Building the assisted reproduction laboratory

BIANCA BIANCO, IVAN HENRIQUE YOSHIDA, MICHELE TANADA, CLAUDIA SAGANUMA, DENISE MARIA CHRISTOFOLINI, AND CAIO PARENTE BARBOSA

Introduction	25
Purposes of the lab	25

xi	Location	25
xv	Laboratory	26
	Andrology laboratory	26
	Liquid nitrogen containers storage room	26
	Gas cylinders central and management	27
	General material storage	27
	The building structure	27
	Air flow	27
	Furniture	28
	Equipment	28
	Safety	28
	Personal experience	29
	Concluding remarks	29
	References	29
	4. Workup of female infertility	
	GIOVANNI BUZZACCARINI, AMERIGO VITAGLIANO, AND ANTONIO SIMONE LAGANÀ	
	Introduction	31
	Conclusion	38
	References	38
	5. Work-up of male infertility	
	LUCA BOERI, EDOARDO POZZI, AND ANDREA SALONIA	
	Epidemiology	41
	Etiology and risk factors	41
	Diagnostic work-up	42
	Patient's history	42
	Medical history	42
	Lifestyle factors	43
	Surgical history	43
	Family history	43
	Sexual history	43
	Physical examination	43
	Semen analysis	44
	Measurement of sperm DNA fragmentation index	45
	Hormonal evaluation	46
	Genetic testing	46
	Chromosomal abnormalities	46
	Autosomal abnormalities	47
	Cystic fibrosis gene mutations	47
	Y microdeletions	48
	Measurement of oxidative stress	48
	Imaging	48
	Transrectal US	49

Other	49	Pathogenesis	79
Summary	49	Etiology	80
References	49	Prevalence	80
		Other associated anomalies	80
6. Prothrombotic gene polymorphisms and adverse reproductive outcomes in assisted reproductive technology		Clinical presentation	80
MILAN TERZIC AND GULZHANAT AIMAGAMBETOVA		Classification	80
		Diagnosis	81
Physiology of coagulation	55	Uterine abnormalities	86
Coagulation factors' gene mutations	55	Control after hysteroscopic surgery	94
Blood coagulation in pregnancy	57	Recommendations and conclusions	95
Prothrombotic hereditary coagulopathies and recurrent pregnancy loss		References	95
ART procedures in current practice			
Prothrombotic gene polymorphisms and adverse reproductive outcomes in ART	58	10. Uterine fibroids and infertility	
Preconceptional and prenatal diagnostic approach	59	VERONIKA GÜNTHER, DAMARIS FREYTAG, AND	
Possible management options	60	IBRAHIM ALKATOUT	
Conclusions	60		
References	61	Introduction and definition	97
		Pathophysiology	100
7. Endocrinological causes of female infertility		Diagnosis	100
STELLA LANCUBA, MARIA JOSE ESPAÑA DE MARCO, MARCOS SEAN THOMSON, AND MARTA TESONE		Management	102
		Recommendation	103
Introduction	65	Conclusion	104
Anovulation	65	References	104
Ovarian aging	66		
Ovarian reserve	66	11. Endometriosis and infertility	
Primary ovarian insufficiency	66	TIMUR GURGAN AND GIZEM BEKTAS	
Polycystic ovary syndrome	67		
Hypothalamic-pituitary axis pathology	67	Pathophysiology	107
Therapeutical intervention	68	Fertility preservation in women with endometriosis	112
Preventing complications	69	References	113
Final considerations	69		
References	69	12. Endocrinological causes of male infertility	
		ALAYMAN HUSSEIN	
8. Management of tubal factor		Introduction	119
ANTOINE WATRELOT AND M. AL NAQBI		Hormonal actions on spermatogenesis	119
		Hormonal regulations of spermatogenesis	120
Tubal infertility	71	Endocrine conditions associated with male infertility	120
Tubal lesions	71	Evaluation of an infertile man from an endocrinological point of view	121
What are the subtle tubal lesions?	72	Therapies	121
Conclusion	77	The protocol of hormonal treatment of infertile men	122
References	77	References	123
9. Cervical and uterine congenital anomalies		13. Sperm DNA fragmentation: impact on ART outcome	
LUIS ALONSO PACHECO, JOSE CARUGNO, AND LAURA NIETO PASCUAL		ALA'A FARKOUH, VILMANTE KODYTE, AHMAD MAJZOUB, AND ASHOK AGARWAL	
Introduction	79	Introduction	125
Embryology: the origin of anomalies	79	Measuring SDF within the context of ART	125
		The impact of SDF on IUI	126
		The impact of SDF on IVF and ICSI	126
		Approaches to reduce SDF in ART	129

Future directions	130	19. Ovulation induction protocols	
Summary of key points	131	OMAR SEFRIQUI	
References	131	Introduction	191
14. Male accessory gland infection: diagnosis and treatment		Indications	191
ROSSELLA CANNARELLA, ROSITA A. CONDORELLI, LAURA CIMINO, LAURA M. MONGIOÌ, MICHELE COMPAGNONE, FEDERICA BARBAGALLO, ANDREA CRAFA, ALDO E. CALOGERO, AND SANDRO LA VIGNERA		Pre-IUI tests	192
Definition and classification	135	Performing intrauterine insemination	192
Impact on fertility: explanatory mechanisms	135	Prognostic factors of IUI	194
Diagnosis	136	Conclusion	195
Therapeutic strategies	139	Bibliography	195
Conclusion	142	20. Ovarian stimulation protocols	
References	142	KONSTANTINOS DAFOPOULOS AND BASIL C. TARLATZIS	
15. Hormonal and nonhormonal treatment of male infertility		Introduction	199
RHIANNA DAVIES, CHANNA N. JAYASENA, AND SUKS MINHAS		References	203
Etiology of male infertility	145	21. Oocyte retrieval	
Pathophysiology of spermatogenesis	145	NINA JANČAR AND HELENA BAN FRANGEŽ	
Principles of management	145	Introduction	205
References	152	Setting and equipment	205
16. Surgical management of male infertility and sperm retrieval		Preparation of the patient for oocyte retrieval	206
NICOLA ARRIGHI		On the day of oocyte retrieval	206
Surgical management of conditions related to male infertility	155	Technique	206
Sperm retrieval in azoospermic men	159	Anesthesia during oocyte retrieval	207
References	161	Oocyte recovery	208
17. How to choose the appropriate ART technique and counseling about reproductive outcomes		After the oocyte retrieval	208
AINE MCNALLY AND MICHAEL CHAPMAN		Complications	208
References	169	References	209
Further reading	170	22. Oocyte quality evaluation and cryopreservation	
18. Preparing the couple for ART: necessary and unnecessary diagnostic tests		PINAR OZCAN, BULUT VARLI, NECATI FINDIKLI, MURAT BASAR, AND ENGIN ORAL	
ANDREA ROBERTO CAROSSO, ALESSANDRO RUFFA, BERNADETTE EVANGELISTI, NOEMI LUCIA MERCALDO, ANDREA GAROLLA, CARLO FORESTA, CHIARA BENEDETTO, AND ALBERTO REVELLI		Human oocyte quality evaluation	211
Introduction	173	Metaphase II (MII) oocyte dysmorphisms	214
Tests to be performed by both partners	173	Factors affecting oocyte quality	215
Tests to be performed by the woman	177	Oocyte cryopreservation	216
Tests to be performed by the man	181	Conclusion	218
References	184	References	219
		23. Ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome	
		STEFANO PALOMBA AND DONATELLA CASERTA	
		Introduction	223
		Definition	223
		Epidemiology	223
		Classifications	225
		Pathophysiology	225
		Clinical presentation	226
		Clinical assessment	227

Prevention	228	28. Luteal phase support	
Treatment	234	SERGIO PAPIER, MARIANA MIGUENS, AND	
Conclusions	236	ANDREA COSCIA	
References	237	Introduction	275
24. Sperm quality evaluation and cryopreservation		Physiology of the luteal phase	275
RHIANNA DAVIES, CHANNA N. JAYASENA, AND SUKS MINHAS		Pharmacodynamics and types of presentation of progesterone	276
Sperm quality evaluation	241	Routes of administration	276
Cryopreservation of spermatozoa	246	LPS in assisted reproductive treatments	277
References	247	Disorders of endometrial receptivity and Personalized Embryo Transfer	281
25. In vitro fertilization and embryo culture in time-lapse imaging		Conclusions	282
ALISON CAMPBELL, AMY BARRIE, AND RACHEL SMITH		References	282
Introducing time-lapse devices	251	29. Preimplantation genetic testing	
Embryo selection using time lapse	251	SANDRINE CHAMAYOU	
Anticipating the future	256	Principle and history of preimplantation genetic testing	287
Summary	257	Protocol of PGT	288
References	257	Results and efficacy of PGT	294
26. Intracytoplasmic sperm injection		Conclusions and the future of PGT	301
DEREK KEATING, STEPHANIE CHEUNG, PHILIP XIE, OLENA M. KOCUR, ZEV ROSENWAKS, AND GIANPIERO D. PALERMO		Acknowledgments	302
Background	259	References	302
Indications	260	30. Embryo quality evaluation and cryopreservation	
Popularity	261	LIVIA PELLEGRINI AND MAURO COZZOLINO	
Results	261	Embryo quality evaluation	309
ICSI for difficult cases	262	Cryopreservation	312
Considerations and future perspective	266	References	315
References	266	31. Frozen embryo transfer	
27. Embryo transfer		ERLISA BARDHI AND PANAGIOTIS DRAKOPOULOS	
PIERALDO INAUDI AND BENEDETTA SCARSELLI		Introduction	317
Introduction	269	Background	318
Learning curves	269	Maternal and obstetric outcomes of FET	321
Biofluidic dynamics of embryo transfer	270	Conclusions	321
The role of the catheter and loading embryos	270	References	322
Preparation of the uterus for transfer	270	32. Egg and sperm donation	
Mock transfer and transvaginal ultrasound for the measurement of the endometrial cavity length and position	271	FERNANDO SÁNCHEZ MARTÍN, PASCUAL SÁNCHEZ MARTÍN, AND JUAN MANUEL JIMÉNEZ TUÑÓN	
Is the ultrasound support effective?	271	Introduction	325
Placement of embryos in the uterine cavity	271	Indications for egg donation	325
Conclusions	272	Indications for sperm donation	325
References	272	Legal aspects	326
Further reading	273	Organizing a gamete donation program	326
		Donors	327

Recipients	329	Techniques for fertility preservation in pediatric patients	379
Results	331	Pregnancy after fertility preservation in cancer survivors	379
Egg bank	331	References	380
References	332		
33. Recurrent miscarriage		37. Psychological impact of infertility and ART procedures	
DALAL KOJOK, GHINA GHAZEERI, AND WILLIAM KUTTEH		HELENE MITCHELL AND WENDY NORTON	
Introduction	333	Introduction	387
Etiologies	334	The psychosocial impact of infertility	387
Parental chromosomal anomalies	334	Psychosocial impact during treatment	388
Conclusion	340	Ending fertility treatment	390
References	341	Recommendations for clinicians	390
		Research limitations	392
34. Repeated implantation failure		Conclusion	392
MICHAEL PAPAPANOU AND CHARALAMPOS SIRISTATIDIS		References	393
Introduction	345		
Definitions	345	38. Risk, safety, and outcome monitoring in the IVF clinic	
Causes	345	ROSSANA DI PAOLA, ANGELA CUCCAROLLO, AND SIMONE GARZON	
Diagnostic work-up	346	Introduction	397
Interventions	347	Monitoring of risk, safety, and outcome in ovarian stimulation	398
Conclusion	350	Monitoring of risk, safety, and outcome in oocyte retrieval	398
References	350	Monitoring of risk, safety, and outcome for semen collection and preparation	399
		Monitoring of risk, safety, and outcome in laboratory	399
35. Gestational carrier		Monitoring of risk, safety, and outcome for the entire IVF process	402
NIKOLAOS PRAPAS AND STAMATIOS PETOUSIS		Long-term outcomes for progeny and women	403
Introduction	357	References	403
Indications for surrogacy	357		
Selection process and criteria of gestational carrier	358	39. Regulation, data management, informed consent, and legal issues for ART	
Counseling and legal requirements	358	ILARIA SOAVE AND ROBERTO MARCI	
Synchronization of cycle	358	Introduction	405
Obstetric care of surrogate	359	ART regulation	405
Risks associated with surrogacy	359	Quality and data management	407
Ethical, religious, and financial concerns about the surrogacy procedure	359	Informed consent	408
Psychological impact with surrogacy	360	References	408
Conclusion	361		
References	361	40. Impact of COVID-19 on ART (Assisted Reproductive Technologies)	
		DOMENICO CARONE	
36. Female and male fertility preservation in oncology		Introduction	411
FEDERICO FERRARI, MARTINA RATTI, ANNA CONSOLI, FILIPPO ALBERTO FERRARI, ENRICO SARTORI, AND FRANCO ODICINO		SARS-CoV-2 and reproductive system	411
Introduction	363	References	416
Multidisciplinary fertility sparing team	363		
Counseling and psychological support	364	Index	419
Eligibility for fertility sparing	364		
Cancer treatments that affect female fertility	364		
Cancer treatments that affect male fertility	367		
Techniques for fertility preservation of female patients	370		
Techniques for fertility preservation in males	377		

History and epidemiology of human fertility

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The history of fertility is the history of mankind. Since the dawn of humanity, fertility has played a major role in human thought, culture, and activities, and the mystery of reproduction was one of the earliest dilemmas facing the human race. In fact, for a good part of their early history, humans did not understand how a woman became pregnant, and the discovery of the relation between sexual intercourse and pregnancy must have been one of the earliest concepts achieved by the human brain.

developed a primitive pregnancy test: women were asked to urinate on barley or wheat seeds and sprouting

Fertility in the ancient world

In the ancient world, humans related fertility to superpowers and many fertility deities were worshiped in various parts of the world to seek their help in understanding the mystery of fertility. Most of these deities were female goddesses, as the fertility myth was perceived to reside mainly in the females who bring the offspring to this world. In ancient Egypt, Isis was the goddess of fertility, while Hathor was the goddess that protected women in labor (Fig. 1.1). In ancient Greece, Aphrodite was the goddess of fertility. She was also the mother of Eros, the god of love, while in Roman mythology, Venus was the goddess of love, sex, beauty, and fertility. In African culture, the goddess was Ashanti, and in the Inca culture, she was Mama Oclio. In China, she was Jiutian Xuanwu, while in India, she was Banka-Mundi. In Sumerian and Babylonian cultures, she was Ishtar, and in Ireland, she was Brigit. Each goddess had powers that were also helped by certain rituals and flowers that attracted fertility, mainly the rose, the lotus, and the orchid [1].

On occasions, attempts were made to develop more mundane solutions for infertility, but these were not successful due to the absence of the basic tools and the scientific method. For example, ancient Egyptians



FIGURE 1.1 Headless sculpture of Isis, goddess of fertility in ancient Egypt made from basalt showing the characteristic knot on her chest from the Graeco-Roman Period (332 BCE–395 CE) found in Alexandria (Bibliotheca Alexandrina collection).

seeds indicated pregnancy. While this may sound like pseudoscience, Ghalioungui et al. reported that it correctly identified 70%–85% of pregnancies [2].

In ancient Greece, attempts at explaining fertility and infertility were made but offer little to help in our current understanding of the fertility process. The Hippocratic Corpus contains three texts related to fertility, “Diseases of Women” (*Gynaikeia*) 1 and 2 and “On Infertile Women” (*Peri Aphorôn*) with various empirical treatments and recipes. Even Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the most enlightened of the Greek philosophers, believed that only male semen was incorporated into the fetus and that the female played no role in the generative material. However, Soranus of Ephesus, one of the leading scientists of the old Alexandria Medical School, and who was the first to describe the human uterus, contradicted Aristotle, and wrote in his book “Gynecology” that both the male and female produce “seeds” necessary for conception [3]. He also noted that masculine-appearing females and those exercising excessively failed to menstruate and commented on contraception, noting that blockade of the cervical os was an effective means of preventing conception [4].

Galen (129–200 AD) was a leading Roman physician who also trained in Alexandria before traveling to Rome to become the personal physician of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus. He described the “female testes,” which he thought corresponded to the male testes, and thought that menstruation was a form of auto-phlebotomy and represented a means to eliminate unfavorable circulating humors, a concept that remained alive well into the Middle Ages [5]. However, few advances were made during the Middle Ages, and even during the Arab/Islamic golden age in Andalusia, no notable discoveries were made in the field apart from the primitive obstetrics forceps described by Abulcassis of Cordoba [6].

Fertility in the post-Renaissance era

It is only after the Renaissance and subsequent age of enlightenment that various discoveries started to shed light on our current understanding of the processes of human reproduction. In 1506, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) began his anatomical drawings in Milan and later collaborated with the physician-anatomist Marcantonio della Torre in Pavia and made an accurate sketch of the fetus in utero [7]. Subsequently, Gabriele Falloppio (1523–62) professor of anatomy in Padua described the Fallopian tube, which bears his name to this day. However, the real breakthrough came with the invention of the microscope when Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723) a Dutch scientist and businessman living in Delft was the first to observe and

describe the spermatozoa using his primitive instrument and called them “animalicules” [8].

It was also the Dutch physician and anatomist Regnier de Graaf (1641–73) also working in Delft who summarized the work of his predecessors and made key discoveries in reproductive biology. He described the testicular tubules, the efferent ducts, and corpora lutea and was probably the first to understand the reproductive function of the Fallopian tube, but his most important discovery is probably the description of the ovarian follicles (later called after him: Graafian follicles), which he thought were the oocytes [9]. Subsequently, the Italian priest and physiologist Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729–99) working in Pavia was the first to show that fertilization requires physical contact between the sperm and the ovum and used this information to perform successful artificial insemination in dogs in 1770 [10]. Ten years later, the Scottish surgeon John Hunter (1728–93) working in London performed the first successful artificial insemination in humans [10]. However, it was the Baltic-German scientist Karl Ernst von Baer (1792–1876) who eventually discovered the human oocyte in 1827 while working at Königsberg University in Kaliningrad and showed that it resided inside the follicle [9]. Finally, it was Oscar Hertwig (1849–1922) working in Berlin who, by studying sea urchins, proved in 1870 that fertilization occurs due to the fusion of a sperm and an egg cell [11].

At the same time, the concept of hormones was introduced by Arnold Berthold (1803–1861) in 1846 while working in the University of Göttingen by finding that castrated cock chickens lost their aggressive male behavior and characteristics, but it was Ernest Starling and William Bayliss of University College London who introduced the term “hormone” in 1905 [12] (Fig. 1.2).

Fertility in modern times

With the dawning of the 20th century and the understanding of the basic principles of fertility, major discoveries were made in a remarkably short time. These included the understanding of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis, the discovery of gonadotrophins and the isolation of gonadal steroids, the understanding of the hormonal changes involved in the control of the menstrual cycle, culminating in the success of in-vitro fertilization and its allied techniques.

The hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis

In 1910, Samuel Crowe, working at Johns Hopkins, showed that partial pituitary ablation resulted in

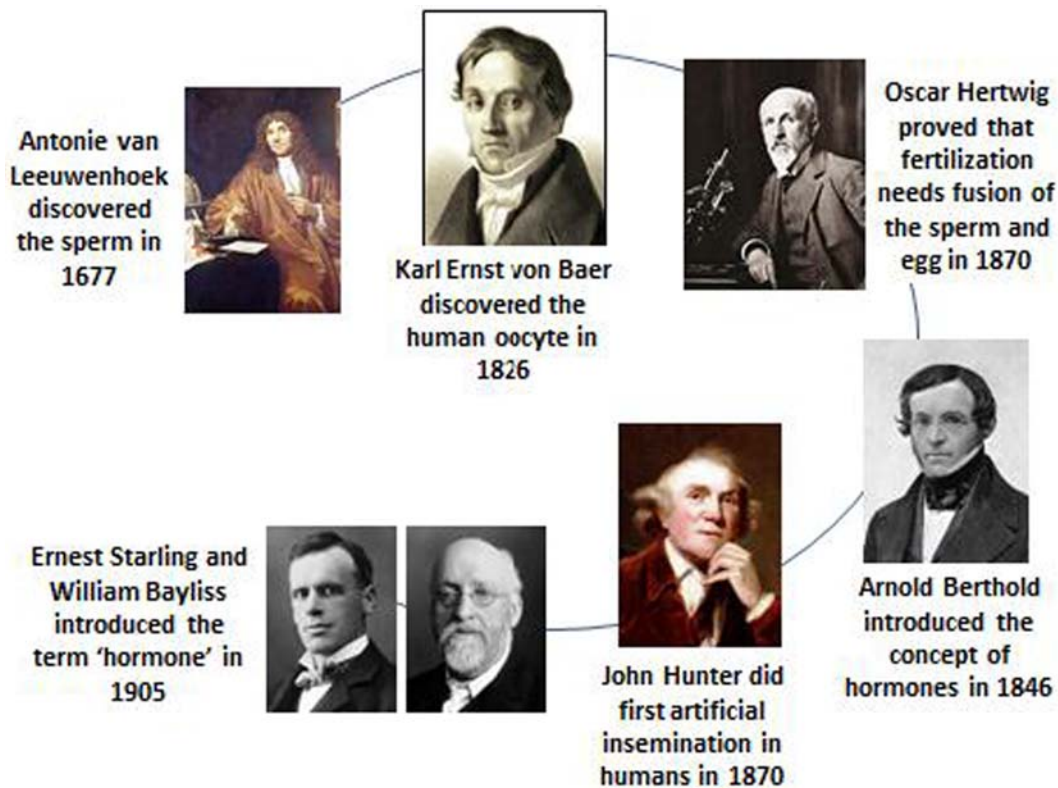


FIGURE 1.2 The fathers of human reproduction in the post-Renaissance era. Adapted from Lunenfeld B. *Gonadotropin stimulation: past, present and future*. *Reprod Med Biol*. 2012;11(1):11–25.

atrophy of the genital organs in adult dogs [13], and in 1912, the Austrian physician Bernhard Aschner (1883–1960) working in Vienna observed that men and women with diseases, tumors, or injuries of the hypophysis and pituitary stalk suffered the same fate [14]. Subsequently, in 1926 Philip Smith (1884–1970) working in Berkeley and later in Columbia showed that daily implants of fresh anterior pituitary gland tissue into immature male and female mice and rats induced precocious sexual maturity [15].

At the same time (in 1926), Bernhard Zondek (1891–1966) working in the Charité Hospital in Berlin implanted anterior pituitary glands from adult cows, bulls, and humans into immature animals and showed that this led to rapid development of sexual puberty [16]. It was also Zondek who proposed in 1929 the idea that the pituitary secretes two hormones that stimulate the gonads—Prolan A and Prolan B—and in 1930, he showed that the blood and urine of postmenopausal women contained gonadotropins. He proposed that Prolan A stimulated follicular growth and the secretion of “foliculin” (estradiol) and that Prolan B induced ovulation, formation of the corpus luteum, and secretion

of “lutein” (progesterone) [16]. He also suggested in 1930 that the synchronization of Prolan A and Prolan B secretion by the anterior pituitary was responsible for the rhythmic activity of the ovary and the cyclic preparation of the endometrium [17]. However, it was in 1931 that Fevold working in Wisconsin actually extracted the two hormones from the pituitary and called them follicle-stimulating (FSH) and luteinizing (LH) hormones [18].

Simultaneously, in 1927, Selmar Ascheim (1878–1965), working again with Bernhard Zondek at the Charité Hospital in Berlin, showed that the blood and urine of pregnant women contained a substance that stimulated the gonads. They also showed that injecting this substance into intact immature female mice produced follicular maturation and luteinization, which was to become the Ascheim Zondek pregnancy test [19]. However, Ascheim and Zondek believed that this substance was produced by the anterior pituitary, and it was in 1943 that Georganna Seegar-Jones (1912–2005) working at Johns Hopkins showed that this gonadotropin was produced by the placenta and not the pituitary gland and called it human chorionic gonadotrophin (HCG) [20].

The gonadotrophins

With the understanding of the role of gonadotrophins, attempts at using them for treating infertile women started. Pregnant mare serum gonadotrophins (PMSG) were the first to be used, and in 1945, Hamblen et al. of Duke University in North Carolina introduced the two-step protocol for women with hypofunctioning ovaries: administration of PMSG during the follicular phase followed by HCG 12–18 days later [21]. In parallel, and in the same year of 1945, HMG was purified and isolated from urine of menopausal women and the first pregnancy was reported by Lunenfeld et al. in 1962 [22].

On the other hand, in 1958, Carl Gemzell, working in Uppsala, Sweden, extracted gonadotropins from human pituitary glands and used them to treat anovulation. However, in 1990, four cases of Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD or mad-cow disease) were discovered in Australia, France, and the United Kingdom, and the production of these human pituitary gonadotrophins was stopped [16]. HMG therefore became the drug of choice, with each ampoule containing 75 IU of FSH and 75 IU of LH.

With the use of HMG, it became clear that the patients' response to stimulation varied. Patients with polycystic ovarian syndrome who already had a high LH/FSH ratio were particularly liable to ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. Work on the purification of HMG using polyclonal antibodies to remove LH by immunochromatography started, and in 1982, purified HMG (urofollitropin) was available on the market, with each ampoule containing 75 IU of FSH and 25 IU of LH. Highly purified HMG (urofollitropin-HP) was introduced next using monoclonal antibodies with each ampoule containing 75 IU of FSH and less than 1 IU of LH [16]. With increased demand and the proliferation of IVF units, recombinant FSH was introduced by incorporating the FSH gene into the nuclear DNA of Chinese hamster ovary cells. Follitropin- α was produced in 1988 and Follitropin- β in 1996 (Table 1.1).

TABLE 1.1 Comparison of HMG and FSH preparations.

Product	Purity (%)	Specific activity
HMG (menotropins)	5	Variable
Purified FSH (urifollitropin)	5	100–150 IU/mg
Highly purified FSH (urifollitropin-HP)	95	10,000 IU/mg
Recombinant FSH (follitropin α and β)	>99	Mass/ μ g

Gonadal steroids

As in the case of gonadotrophins, the discovery of estrogens went through various stages. In the 1880s, Robert Battey (1928–1895) working in Atlanta, Georgia, performed oophorectomy as a treatment for dysmenorrhea and bleeding from fibroids. After removal of the ovaries, he observed that patients developed amenorrhoea, hot flashes, and vaginal atrophy. This meant that the ovaries were secreting a substance responsible for menstruation. In 1896, Emil Knauer (1867–1935) working with Josef Halban (1870–1937) and Ludwig Fraenkel (1870–1951) in Vienna removed the ovaries from rabbits and observed uterine atrophy, which he could prevent by transplanting the ovary at a distant site, confirming the theory of internal secretion by the ovaries. Finally, in 1897, Hubert Fothergill successfully used ovarian extracts to treat a patient with severe hot flashes [23].

Thus with the beginning of the 20th century, work started in earnest to isolate this substance secreted from the ovary called “estrogen.” In 1929, the German biochemist Adolf Butenandt (1903–95), who received the Nobel Prize in 1939, and the American biochemist Edward Adelbert Doisy (1893–1986), who also received the Nobel Prize in 1943, independently isolated and purified estrone, the first estrogen to be discovered. Subsequently, estriol and estradiol were discovered in 1930 and 1933, respectively [23].

On the other hand, the discovery of progesterone followed a different path. In 1929, Georges Corner (1889–1981) and William Allen (1904–93) working in the United States extracted a substance from the corpus luteum of a pregnant rabbit. They injected the extract into another rabbit that was castrated just after mating and found that the pregnancy continued. They called the substance “progestin” [24]. However, it was again Adolf Butenandt who isolated the same substance in 1934 and discovered that it contained a ketone group and called it progesterone [25].

The discovery of the aromatase system responsible for the conversion of androgens to estrogens involved the collaboration of many scientists from the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology, established in 1944 in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, and from Harvard. They included Ralph Dorfman (1911–85) and the enzymologist Mika Hayano (1920–1964) who used radiolabeled tracer steroids in their experiments [26]. But it was Kenneth Ryan and Lewis Engel at Harvard who utilized human placental microsomal preparations to convert androgens to estrogens in high yields [27]. Subsequently, Armstrong and Dorrington working in Ontario, Canada, suggested the 2 cell 2 gonadotrophin theory to explain the interplay between the gonadotrophin and ovarian hormones in the ovary [28].

Immuno-assays and the female hormonal interplay

Rosalyn Yalow (1921–2011) and Solomon Berson (1918–72) working in New York cooperated in their discovery of immunoassays, and Yalow received the Nobel Prize in 1977. This meant that it was then possible to measure compounds present in biological fluids (blood or urine) in nmol and even pmol concentrations [29]. This immediately opened the door for the discovery of the intricate relations between FSH, LH, estrogens, and progesterone. It was also possible to measure estradiol, estriol, and estrone separately. Thus the temporal relationships between the pituitary hormones and the gonadal hormones became clearer, and the classical diagram showing these relationships and which we now take for granted was published simultaneously in 1970 by two groups: the Columbia University group headed by Raymond Vande Wiele (1922–83) [30] and the California group headed by Robert Jaffe (1933–2020) [31].

Other milestones in the history of fertility

Some other important discoveries supplemented our current understanding of human fertility. In 1971, Roger Guillemin (Baylor College of Medicine) and Andrew Schally (Tulane University) discovered the gonadotrophin-releasing hormone (GnRH) and jointly received the Nobel Prize in 1977. This development helped our further understanding of the fertility process and opened the door for the manufacturing of GnRH agonists and antagonists that proved of great value in assisted reproduction in later years [32,33]. On another front, Peter Medawar (1915–87), while working at the National Institute for Medical Research in the United Kingdom, received the Nobel Prize of 1960 for his discovery of the mechanisms involved in acquired immunological tolerance, which was instrumental in our understanding of the embryo implantation process [34].

The IVF revolution

The birth of Louise Brown on Tuesday July 25, 1978, was an extraordinary milestone in the field of human fertility and was the culmination of numerous years of hard work for all involved. In the early 1960s, Patrick Steptoe (1913–88), a consultant gynecologist in Oldham near Manchester, had paid a visit to Professor Raoul Palmer (1904–85) in Paris who had pioneered the then new technique of laparoscopy. Upon his return to England, Steptoe gave a talk on laparoscopy at the Royal Society of Medicine in London in 1968, and although his fellow

gynecologists were not impressed by this new technique, he was approached by Robert Edwards who was a young scientist working in Cambridge University [35]. Edwards had been working on fertilizing mammalian oocytes since 1955 and had started working with human oocytes in 1965 [36]. Following this encounter, one of the most important collaborations in the field of human reproduction started with Edwards regularly traveling from Cambridge to Oldham and vice-versa to fertilize oocytes collected by Steptoe through laparoscopy.

After 4 years of basic research, Steptoe and Edwards started their first human transfers in 1972, but none of their first 40 patients became pregnant [35]. In 1976, they achieved their first IVF pregnancy after a blastocyst transfer, which unfortunately turned out to be an ectopic pregnancy. Two years later and after 102 failed attempts, Leslie Brown became pregnant following the transfer of an 8-cell embryo in a nonstimulated cycle and gave birth to a full-term, normal, fit, and healthy baby “Louise” by caesarean section as reported in the *Lancet* the following week [37]. On January 4, 1979, they achieved the birth of their second baby, Alastair Macdonald, who was the world’s first boy conceived by IVF.

Steptoe and Edwards had originally suggested that IVF should be done in nonstimulated cycles to avoid any negative effect of the stimulation drugs on the endometrium. However, the team of Carl Wood and Alan Trounson in Monash succeeded in achieving the first successful IVF in Australia in June 1980 in a clomiphene-stimulated cycle, and the birth of the fourth baby in the world [38]. And shortly afterward, Howard and Georganna Jones working at the Jones institute of Eastern Virginia School of Medicine achieved the birth of the first IVF baby in the United States in an HMG-stimulated cycle on December 28, 1981 [39]. Both Steptoe and Edwards received many honors in recognition of their pioneering work including a CBE from the British Queen and Edwards received the Nobel Prize in 2010, although he could not receive it in person due to his illness [35].

Further developments in assisted reproduction

It is important to note that until 1981, monitoring folliculogenesis was effected mainly by the daily measurement of plasma estradiol, and the time of oocyte retrieval was decided on the basis of serial measurement of LH in blood or urine, as follicles could not be seen by the linear ultrasound machines available then. And although Alfred Kratochwil working in Vienna had reported the visualization of ovarian follicles with static B-mode ultrasound in 1972 [40], follicular scanning became more realistic with the introduction of abdominal sector scanners in the early 1980s, and the first series of monitoring gonadotrophin therapy with ultrasound,

without hormonal assays, was reported by Schmidt and von Holst in 1981 [41] and Sallam et al. in 1982 working at King's College Hospital in London [42]. The first successful attempt at oocyte retrieval by transabdominal transvesical ultrasound was reported by Lens et al. working at the Rigshospitalet in Copenhagen in 1981 [43]. However, by 1985, vaginal ultrasound machines were introduced, and transvaginal ultrasound-directed oocyte retrieval was first reported by Dellenbach et al. in Strasbourg [44], and it rapidly became the universal method of oocyte retrieval.

Simultaneously, other developments were taking place on the laboratory front. Advances in cryopreservation allowed the freezing of embryos for transfer in subsequent cycles. The first ever pregnancy derived from a frozen human embryo was reported by Alan Trounson and Linda Mohr in 1983 but ended in spontaneous abortion at 10 weeks of gestation [45]. The first babies (twins) derived from frozen embryos were born December 26, 1983, in the Netherlands [46]. At the same time, the world's first successful preimplantation genetic diagnosis was performed by Handyside et al. at the Hammersmith Hospital in London. Female embryos were selectively transferred in five couples at risk of X-linked disease, resulting in two twins and one singleton pregnancy [47].

The story of ICSI

Toward the end of the 1980s, micromanipulation of the human oocytes was introduced in an attempt to treat couples with unexplained and male factor infertility. As direct injection of sperm in the cytoplasm of the oocyte had not been tried in animals before, various groups experimented with milder forms of micromanipulation such as subzonal insemination (SUZI). The first successful case of SUZI, a twin pregnancy, was reported in 1990 by Simon Fishel working in Nottingham [48]. Subsequently, in an apparently lucky event for humanity, Gianpiero Palermo working under the chairmanship of André van Steirteghem at the Free University of Brussels accidentally injected a spermatozoon in the cytoplasm of an oocyte, and found that fertilization and cleavage occurred. The embryo was replaced and pregnancy resulted in the birth of a healthy baby [49]. Intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) was born, starting another revolution in the treatment of male infertility.

Embryo selection, fertility preservation, and the future

In an attempt to improve the clinical results of IVF and ICSI, various methods for embryo selection were

introduced including the use of time-lapse systems and the analysis of various components in the spent medium of cultured embryos (genomes, metabolomes, and proteomes). However, so far, none of these methods has proven its superiority [50,51]. Preimplantation genetic testing for aneuploidy (PGT-A) is now being advanced as the method of choice. However, it is still under scrutiny [52].

On another front, fertility preservation is now a real option for men and women who survive cancer treatment or opt for delaying their fertility for social reasons [53]. Advances were made in cryopreserving oocytes, ovarian tissue, and even a whole ovary for future transplantation [54,55]. Indeed, the story of human fertility is a never ending story and each day brings new developments in this exciting field.

Epidemiology of human fertility

No treatise on the history of human fertility is complete without a thorough discussion of its epidemiology. We will now discuss normal fertility trends, the prevalence and causes of infertility, the burden of infertility, and finally the need for fertility services and whether they are adequately met both in developed and developing countries.

Normal fertility patterns and the definition of infertility

In a study of 340 couples practicing natural family planning methods to conceive, Gnoth et al. found that 310 couples achieved a pregnancy within 1 year. The cumulative probabilities of conception based on Kaplan–Meier survival analysis were 38%, 68%, 81%, and 92% at 1, 3, 6, and 12 months of regular sexual intercourse, and although pregnancy could happen afterward, the probability of conception diminished significantly with time [56]. This work confirmed earlier observations by Collis et al., Gleicher et al., and also of Hull et al. [57–59]. Consequently, and based on these findings, WHO defines infertility as the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months of regular, unprotected sexual intercourse [60].

Prevalence of infertility

In a study by Boivin et al., based on surveys involving 172,413 women (52,253 from developed countries and 120,160 from developing countries), the prevalence of infertility ranged from 3.5% to 16.7% with a median figure

of 9% in women aged 20 to 44 in married and consensual unions. This median estimate of 9% was nearly the same in developed as well as in developing countries with a sensible range of 5%–15% in both groups [61]. These data contradict previous reports showing a higher incidence of infertility among developing countries (particularly in Africa) compared to developed countries, where infertility was mainly blamed on genital and sexually transmitted infections [62].

At the same time, the total worldwide population of infertile people is very difficult to estimate due to the heterogeneity of the definitions used, the populations studied, and whether infertility is defined as being located in women, couples, people, or individuals. Nevertheless, various studies put the figures in the many millions [63]. For example, a WHO-supported study of 47 Demographic and Health Surveys had found that more than 186 million women in all of the developing countries surveyed (except China) were infertile, more than one-quarter of ever-married women of reproductive age in these countries [64]. However, the more realistic estimate based on the aforementioned study by Boivin et al. of 172,413 women from 25 populations (from developed and developing countries) estimated that there were 72.4 million infertile women in 2007 [61]. More recently, the 2010 Global Burden of Disease Study supported by WHO and the Gates Foundation analyzed 277 reproductive and health surveys from 190 countries and territories and estimated the number of infertile women at 48.5 million. However, this study defined infertility as the inability to achieve a live birth after a 5-year exposure period [65]. According to WHO, reducing the time frame from 5 to 2 years would increase the total number of infertile couples to 121 million [63].

Seeking infertility treatment

Despite these large numbers of infertile couples, only about half of them seek medical services, and even a smaller percentage succeed in receiving them, both in developed and developing countries. In their same study, Boivin et al. found that the proportion of infertile couples seeking medical care was, on average, 56.1% (range 42%–76.3%) in more developed countries and 51.2% (range 27%–74.1%) in less developed countries. They also found that the proportion of people actually receiving care was substantially less at 22.4% in both groups [61]. Based on these estimates, they calculated that about 40.5 million couples were seeking infertility medical care then (2007) [62].

Factors affecting the success of infertility treatment

Whether pregnancy occurs with or without treatment depends on various factors, which can be summarized as follows [66]:

1. Knowledge of the maximum fertile period. Many couples assume wrongly that the day of ovulation is the best day for conception. In their analysis of 225,596 menstrual cycles from 98,903 women, Faust et al. confirmed previous studies and found that the probability of conception was highest when intercourse took place 1 day before ovulation (42%) followed by 2 days before ovulation (33%), 3 days before ovulation (27%) and 20% when it occurred on the day of ovulation [67] (Fig. 1.3).
2. Time of unwanted nonconception. The chances of a couple in achieving a pregnancy diminish the longer the time they have been trying to conceive. As mentioned before, Gnath et al. found that 81% of the pregnancies occur in the first six cycles with regular intercourse in the fertile period. One out of two couples of the remaining 19% will conceive spontaneously in the next six cycles. After 12 unsuccessful cycles, 8% of the couples will remain infertile, and after 48 months, 5% of the couples are definitively infertile with a nearly zero chance of achieving a spontaneous pregnancy [57].
3. Age of the woman. Female fertility starts to decline around 25–30 years of age. In their seminal paper, Eijkemans et al. showed that the age-related loss of

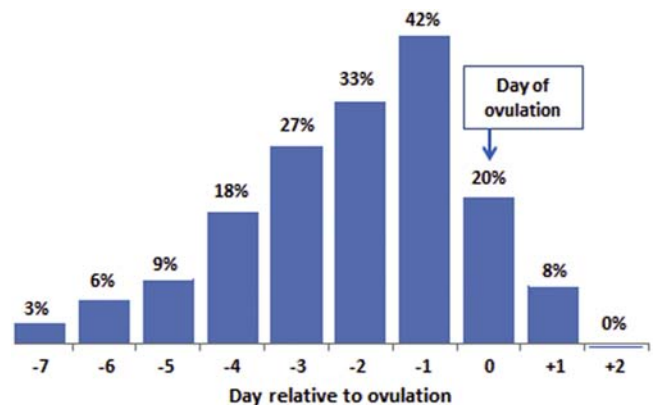


FIGURE 1.3 Chance of conception per day of cycle. Adapted from Faust L, Bradley D, Landau E, Noddin K, Farland LV, Baron A, Wolfberg A. Findings from a mobile application-based cohort are consistent with established knowledge of the menstrual cycle, fertile window, and conception. *Fertil Steril*. 2019;112(3):450–457.e3.

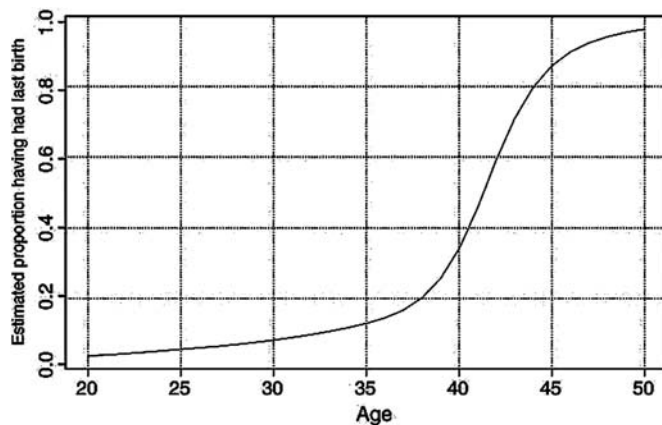


FIGURE 1.4 Cumulative age at last birth (ALB) curves showing declining fertility with age. From Eijkemans et al. with the kind permission of the Editor of Human Reproduction Eijkemans MJC, van Poppel F, Habbema DE, Smith KR, Leridon H, te Velde ER. Too old to have children? Lessons from natural fertility populations. *Hum Reprod.* 2014;29(6): 1304–1312. <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/deu056>

fertility slowly increases from 4.5% at age 25 years to 7% at age 30 years, 12% at age 35 years, and 20% at age 38 years. It increases rapidly afterward to about 50% at age 41, almost 90% at age 45 years, and approaching 100% at age 50 years [68]. This decline in fertility is related both to the continuous depletion of oocytes stored in the ovaries as well as a decline in oocyte quality (Fig. 1.4). Unfortunately, studies show that most women are not aware of the fact that delaying childbearing increases the risk of infertility, and moreover, many women believe that modern treatment modalities such as IVF can treat the fertility decline associated with advancing age [66].

4. Cause of infertility. The success of infertility treatment depends also on the cause of infertility. In their classical study of a population of 1,850,000 in three French regions, Thonneau et al. found that women alone were responsible for infertility in 33% of the cases, while the man alone was responsible in 20% of the cases. The cause resided in both partners in 39% of cases, while in 8%, infertility was unexplained [69]. Most causes of infertility are nowadays amenable to treatment, and even intractable cases such as absence of the uterus, ovarian failure, or absolute testicular failure can be helped by gamete and embryo donation, uterine transplantation, and surrogacy, whenever the law of the land permits.

Burden of infertility

Infertility exerts a burden both on the infertile couples as well as on the national health systems. On a personal level, infertility is known to cause significant

psychological and social effects, particularly in low and middle income communities, such as fear, anxiety, depression, self-blame, marital stress, emotional abuse, intimate partner violence, and divorce. Other negative consequences include social isolation, economic deprivation, loss of social status, and in some regions of Africa and Asia, violence-induced suicide and even loss of dignity in death [70]. Unfortunately, in many of these societies, the infertility burden falls disproportionately on women, who are often marginalized, socially excluded, and stigmatized [71].

At the same time, infertility exerts an economic burden on the national systems, and unfortunately, in many parts of the world, authorities still claim that infertility is not a health problem, is not a serious health problem, or that contraception is a more pressing need. As “reproductive rights” are now an integral part of human rights, all governments that are signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights cannot advance these arguments anymore and are obliged to include infertility services in their family health programs [72].

Access to infertility services

Infertility services offered by specialists and institutions can be stratified at three different levels: (a) a basic level offering laboratory investigations, ovulation induction with or without artificial insemination, (b) an intermediate level offering IVF with diagnostic endoscopic services with or without cryopreservation services, or (c) an advanced level capable of offering ICSI with or without preimplantation genetic testing (PGT) as well as operative endoscopic surgeries and other advanced services [71].

At the top of these services, assisted reproduction is considered a state-of-the-art technique capable of solving most infertility problems. However, in many parts of the world, this service is not accessible to those who need it most. In 2001, the European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE) had suggested that 1500 couples per million population required ART treatment annually [73]. However, with the exceptions of Australia, Israel, and the Scandinavian countries, few developed nations have met this ESHRE benchmark, and even in North America and the United Kingdom, only 25% and 40% of the optimal number of ART cycles were being carried out, respectively, as of 2009 [74]. Unfortunately, in less developed countries, these services are only available to very few people (e.g., only 1.5% of the needs are met in sub-Saharan Africa) [75]. It is hoped that with time, infertility services will be available to more couples in developed as well as developing countries [70].

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