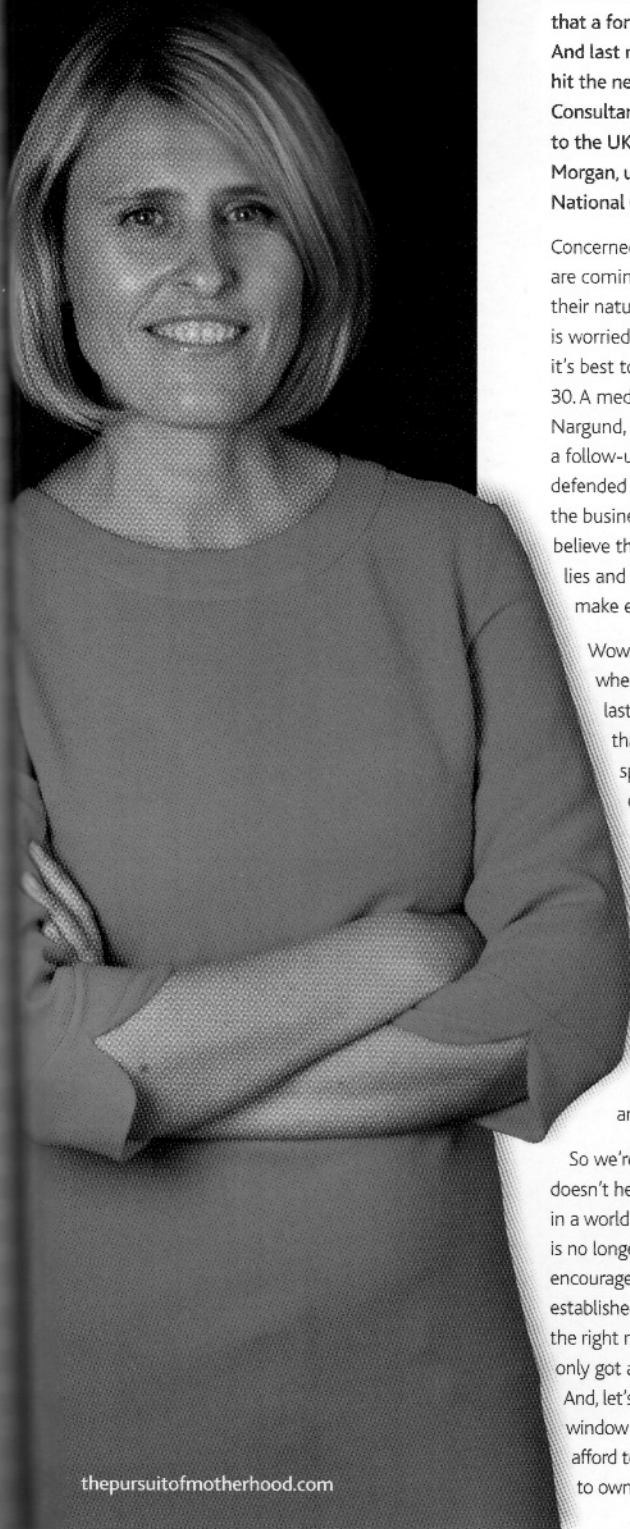


# FROM A PATIENT PERSPECTIVE

A COLUMN BY JESSICA HEPBURN, AUTHOR OF THE PURSUIT OF MOTHERHOOD  
THIS MONTH: EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION



Education is an important word. So important that a former British Prime Minister said it thrice. And last month it was fertility education that hit the news following the leak that top Fertility Consultant, Professor Geeta Nargund, had written to the UK's current Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, urging her to put the subject on the National Curriculum.

Concerned at the growing number of people who are coming to her with problems at an age when their natural fertility is starting to decline, Nargund is worried we're not educating young women that it's best to start trying for a baby before you're 30. A media storm erupted: some supporting Nargund, others accusing her of scaremongering. In a follow-up letter to *The Guardian* newspaper, she defended her position by saying that she wasn't in the business of proscribing life choices but she did believe that women shouldn't be fobbed off with lies and half-truths, and the only way they can make educated choices is to be educated.

Wow. This is all emotive stuff. In a fertility world where emotions are running high already, the last thing we women (or men) need is to feel that we're uneducated. Don't we already spend enough time on the internet Googling everything we need to know? But, putting that aside, it certainly is a complex subject that needs to be unpicked.

It's a biological fact that as age increases through adulthood fertility declines; but it is also true that many women get pregnant in their thirties and forties and the average age of first-time motherhood is increasing. To go back to that same Prime Minister, his wife had a baby aged 45 and I don't believe it was from donor eggs.

So we're faced with a biological conundrum that doesn't help our cause. Added to this we're living in a world where having children in your twenties is no longer regarded as the norm. Teenage girls are encouraged to go to university and get their careers established at the same time as shopping around for the right man. Even if everything goes to plan, you've only got a tiny window before you hit the big 3-0. And, let's face it, you probably haven't got your own window because most young people can no longer afford to buy a home. Many couples say they want to own a house before they start a family but the

average age of the first-time buyer (without a donation from their parents) is 37 which, in fertility terms, is starting to look like a retirement home.

I first started trying for a baby when I was 34. If you'd asked my 'school age' self I would probably have told you that this was the perfect age to conceive. And maybe it would have been perfect if everything had gone to plan. But a year after having sex to schedule with no positive outcome, we went to our first fertility clinic and so began a long struggle to have our own biological baby, which has involved multiple rounds of IVF, several miscarriages and an ectopic pregnancy only discovered at three months.

One of the comments that has most struck me in the recent debate was from Professor Allan Pacey, the outgoing chair of the British Fertility Society. He is also of the opinion that it's wise to start trying before you're 30, but not just because of the fertility life-cycle. He also flags the fact that if there is a problem and you need surgery, hormones or IVF you'll also need about five years to sort those elements out. If a woman starts trying in her mid-thirties she's already on the slippery fertility slope. In my case I have to accept that he's right and it does make me wonder whether routine fertility testing for men and women in their twenties might be an enlightened route to explore. I'm not saying it would answer everything but I'd certainly like to see it promoted as much as egg freezing which, contrary to media reports, is no guarantee for a baby in later life at all.

So, back to education, and I'm going to finish by saying it three times myself. Firstly I do support Nargund's call for children to be better educated about fertility so they can know the facts and make their choice. Secondly I would urge the NHS (and equivalent bodies overseas who don't already) to consider offering basic fertility testing for women in their twenties so they have access to more information about their fertility health while there's still plenty of time to 'sort it out'. But thirdly I also want to see much more education around the rapid growth of the fertility industry and why subfertility (failing to conceive within one year of natural intercourse) seems to be on the increase, because my hunch is that age is not the only reason why more and more couples are knocking on Professor Nargund's door. And, as someone wise once said, the whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows. And that's a window we all need to start looking through.

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