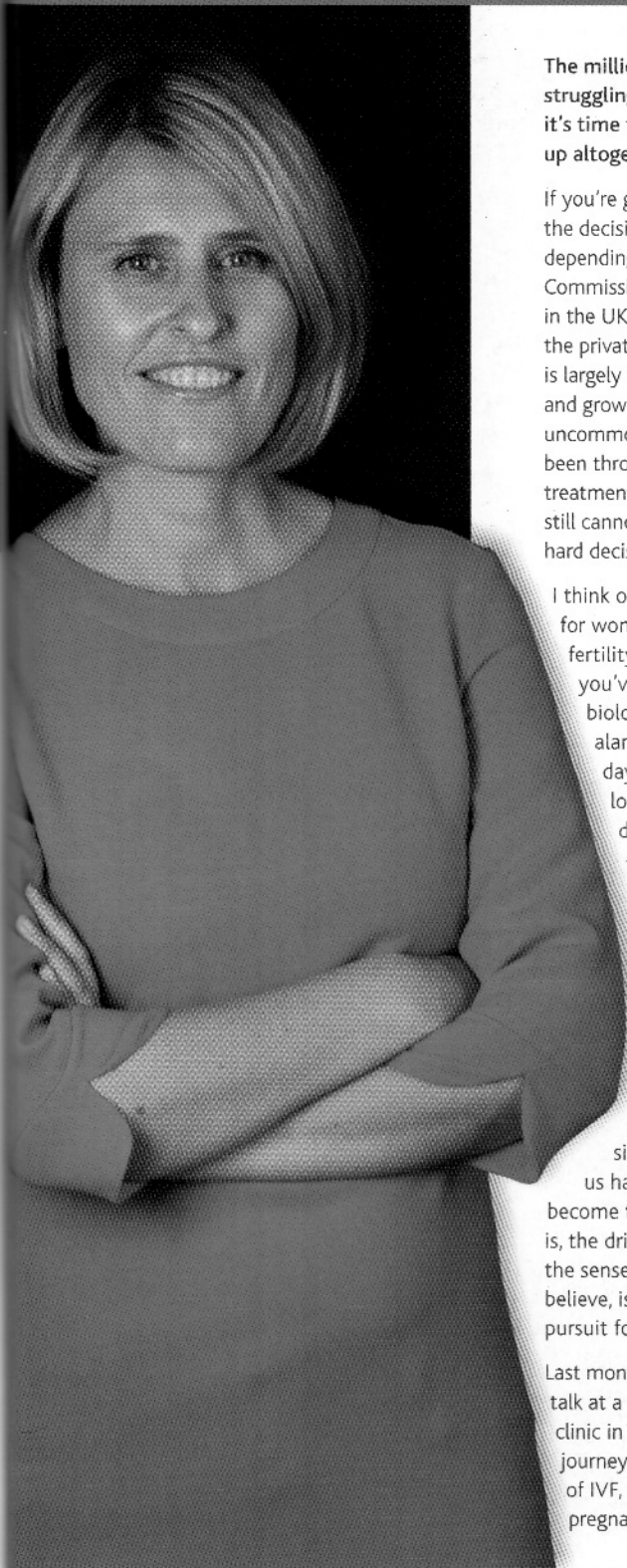


FROM A PATIENT PERSPECTIVE

A COLUMN BY JESSICA HEPBURN, AUTHOR OF *THE PURSUIT OF MOTHERHOOD*
THIS MONTH: WHEN IS THE TIME TO STOP?



The million dollar question: when you're struggling to conceive how do you know when it's time to stop to take a break or even give up altogether?

If you're going through treatment on the NHS, the decision may be taken out of your hands depending on the criteria of your local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). But many people in the UK are paying for their treatment in the private sector and, as a result, the choice is largely theirs to make. Doctors may advise and growing debt may curtail you, but it's not uncommon to hear about people who have been through multiple rounds of unsuccessful treatment, spent a huge amount of money and still cannot and do not stop. So why is it such a hard decision to make and how do you make it?

I think one of the difficult things, particularly for women, is that once you step onto the fertility treatment treadmill, you feel like you've entered a race against time. Your biological clock isn't just ticking, the alarm bell starts ringing furiously. Each day that passes feels closer to the looming threat which has no definitive deadline but we all know is coming – menopause. And many women are also acutely aware of what society says is the 'right' age to have a baby – not too early but, equally, not too late. The race against time is exacerbated by our deep-rooted desire to become parents which turns into desperation when we can't. Who knows whether it's animal instinct, a need to fit in or simply the thing we think will make us happy in a world where happiness has become the ultimate prize. But whatever it is, the drive to have a baby combined with the sense that time is running out to do so, I believe, is what keeps many couples on their pursuit for such a long time.

Last month, I was delighted to be invited to talk at a patient support group at a fertility clinic in Wales. I told them a bit about my own journey which has now involved 11 rounds of IVF, multiple miscarriages and an ectopic pregnancy that almost took my life. Last year

I wrote a book about it called *The Pursuit of Motherhood*.

After I had spoken, one of the women there said that, like me, she had suffered several miscarriages and an ectopic pregnancy and wanted to know how long she and her husband should go on trying. 'I don't know the answer to that,' I said. 'But you do.'

She looked at me confused and so I asked her what her instinct was telling her. I pointed to a place in the centre of my chest. 'What's it saying there?' I asked again tapping it. 'Are you ready to give up?' She instantly replied that she wasn't. So she did have her answer after all.

One of the other things we discussed at the session was how you decide whether to take a break from treatment. On this subject, I always quote a valuable piece of advice that I was once given by a doctor. He said that while there is no doubt your fertility decreases with age, it doesn't simply 'fall off a cliff' as is sometimes implied. You're not fertile one day, and then not the next. The decline is gradual and sometimes taking a break for a couple of months to get your mind and body in the right place for another round of treatment can be hugely beneficial, and can actually increase your chances of success.

I was therefore delighted when a few days after attending the support group, I received an email from another patient who said she had been due to start her fifth IVF cycle the day after we met but that my talk had been a 'penny dropping' moment for her; she had decided to take a break to get physically and mentally stronger and better informed before she decided what to do next. Whilst it may have been my words that spoke to her instinct in a way it understood, it was her instinct that told her what to do.

So I believe there is an answer to the million dollar question. The time to take a break or stop is when your gut instinct says you should. Only you will know when that is. The question is, are you listening?

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