

DEATH FROM EGG HARVESTING

The death of a woman from ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS) is reported in the UK press today. Mrs Akinbolagbe, aged 33, died of a heart attack 48 hours after receiving initial IVF treatment for the harvesting of eggs.

‘It is tragic to read of the death of a young woman as a consequence of fertility treatment,’ said Josephine Quintavalle of Comment on Reproductive Ethics (CORE).

‘It does, however, draw attention to one of the very real risks involved in egg-harvesting. Fortunately deaths are rare (1 per 50,000 treatment cycles according to WHO figures), but there are other serious risks associated with stimulation of the ovaries which should not be overlooked. These can include loss of reproductive capacity, early menopause, and a host of other unpleasant symptoms. In 1-2% of all stimulatory cycles there is recorded evidence of severe associated symptoms, which can be life-threatening if not treated immediately, and a percentage figure of 14% has been suggested for the number of patients suffering some form of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome overall. (J N Hugues, WHO 2002)

‘Ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome remains a major concern for all serious IVF practitioners, and is proving very difficult to avoid. It is more likely to affect younger women and in those who produce large number of eggs. The only intervention seems to be to interrupt treatment as quickly as possible and implement emergency treatment. Those at risk are difficult to identify.

‘CORE is particularly concerned about the effects of OHSS on egg donors. It might be an acceptable risk for a woman desiring a child for herself, but is it acceptable to put donors at risk in this way? Should we be offering them financial incentives to donate? Should we allow women to undergo medical procedures which are not for their own benefit and which can in effect harm them seriously or even cause their deaths?

‘Two young women in Romania are currently litigating against an egg donation clinic in Bucharest, after suffering severe ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. Neither was properly informed of the risks, nor looked after properly when things went wrong. These and other young European women from impoverished backgrounds are being exploited in an extremely unethical way in order to provide eggs for affluent patients in the UK, Europe and the USA.

‘CORE is campaigning strenuously against this growing international trade in human eggs and will be pleased to provide further detailed information to anybody interested.’

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