



PRESS RELEASE

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Progress Educational Trust welcomes Government's public consultation on gamete and embryo storage, including extending the 10-year storage limit on social egg freezing

Fertility and genetics charity the Progress Educational Trust (PET) welcomes the Government's announcement of a public consultation on gamete and embryo storage, including extending the 10-year storage limit for eggs frozen for non-medical (social) reasons.

PET's director Sarah Norcross said: 'PET is delighted the Government has listened to PET's #ExtendTheLimit campaign and heard our calls for a compassionate approach to social egg freezing storage limits and is launching this public consultation which will look at extending the 10-year storage limit for social egg freezing.'

'This is of huge significance for many women, not just those who have frozen their eggs, but women who are considering doing so. Extending the 10-year storage limit on social egg freezing will enable women to exercise reproductive choice, freeing women from the shackles of an outdated, discriminatory and unscientific law, and the threat of having your eggs destroyed against your will or being forced to become a mother before you are ready to do so, either with a partner or via a sperm donor. It will also mean women don't face the additional financial burden of funding the transfer of frozen eggs overseas and later fertility treatment abroad.'

Ms Norcross added: 'Although the consultation is only the first step in a process which PET hopes will result in a change in legislation enabling the 10-year storage limit to be extended, it will bring hope to the thousands of women who have frozen their eggs for social reasons, and those who are considering doing so. However, time is of the essence, especially for those women facing the imminent destruction of their frozen eggs, so we urge the Government to act swiftly. We ask the government to take immediate action so that women's eggs do not have to be used, exported or destroyed while this consultation process is taking place.'

PET's #ExtendTheLimit campaign to change the 10-year storage limit for eggs frozen for social reasons launched in October 2019. Ms Norcross said: 'PET is campaigning to #ExtendTheLimit for social egg freezing because the 10-year storage limit is a clear breach of human rights: it curtails women's reproductive choices, harms women's chances of becoming biological mothers, does not have any scientific basis (eggs remain viable if frozen for longer than ten years) and is discriminatory against women because of the decline in female fertility with age. It

is an arbitrary and outdated piece of legislation that does not reflect improvements in egg freezing techniques and changes in society which push women to have children later in life; that's why it is time for change now.'

<https://www.progress.org.uk/extendthelimit>



ENDS

Case studies

Annalisa Copeland (a pseudonym), 47, froze her eggs 10 years ago. The lack of a life partner means she has not used them yet and she is currently trying to transfer her frozen eggs to a fertility clinic overseas where extended storage is permitted. She says: 'A change in the law would mean I would be able to keep my eggs at their original clinic in the UK, would not need to export them and could undergo IVF treatment when ready here in the UK where I live. I would save thousands of pounds.'

'When I froze my eggs, it was not fully explained to me that I could only keep them in the UK for 10 years. There is no medical or scientific risk in keeping them longer and the limit imposed by the UK government is totally arbitrary. There is no one to help me find a suitable clinic overseas, so I am having to seek one out myself. I have already spent thousands of pounds on extracting and freezing the eggs, and I will now have to spend several thousand more in sending them via a specialist IVF courier to an overseas clinic. They will then remain in storage overseas and I will have to travel there when I am ready to use them, incurring even more costs. I'm keenly aware my eggs could be put under risk by being transported; they would be much safer staying where they are, so ironically the current law is putting my eggs at risk.'

Elizabeth Hamilton (a pseudonym), 46, froze her eggs nearly 10 years ago and is now fighting to avoid having her eggs destroyed against her wishes in 8 months' time. She says: 'The effect the 10-year storage limit is having on me is colossal: I'm constantly anxious about time running out. I feel like a ticking time bomb every day. The options available keep racing through my mind. Do I have a child with my current partner even though we are not ready; do I just pick a random donor and go ahead with it on my own? I don't want to make the wrong decision for my future. But one thing is sure, I really do want to have my own children.'

However, I am now faced with my only chance to become a biological mother being taken away from me. The life and financial sacrifices that I made 10 years ago to secure my baby-making future are being removed because of an outdated law that doesn't really benefit or protect anyone; a law that doesn't serve the whole purpose of freezing eggs in the first place. I hope the law will be changed in time and I won't need to make my decision yet, but time is running out and it doesn't look like it will happen in time for me.

On her decision to freeze her eggs, she says: 'At 36, my internal body clock was screaming at me to have a family. But as a full-time lecturer also running my own business, and who hadn't met the right man, I felt freezing my eggs was the only way to secure my desired future and put my baby panic frenzy on pause. I had hoped to use my eggs earlier, but long-term illness intervened; it's only now that I am well enough to consider the prospect of being a mum. I didn't plan on leaving it this late, but that doesn't mean I don't still want to.'

Sharon Jones, 34, froze her eggs two years ago in the hope of preserving her fertility for the future. She had considered freezing her eggs in her 20s but was put off from doing so because of the 10-year storage limit for social egg freezing. She says: 'Extending the 10-year storage limit for social egg freezing would mean so much not just for me, but for other women too; it would mean we have been heard and can now be hopeful. It would mean we move one step closer to reproductive equality and, having frozen my eggs, it would reduce the anxiety and pressures of using them before their 10-year use-by-date, enabling a less-pressured journey to potential motherhood.'

'Making the decision to freeze your eggs for social reasons is in itself a difficult, stressful, costly, emotional and overwhelming process; a change in the law on social egg freezing would mean that in future women will be able to make medically-informed decisions, without having to factor in fighting a battle with an arbitrary, unscientific law too.'

Sabrina had her eggs frozen over ten years ago when she was in her late 20s. At the end of 2018, she was reluctantly preparing to use donor sperm and become a solo mum in order to avoid her eggs being destroyed. However, weeks before her eggs had to be used or destroyed, a diagnosis of premature infertility resulted in a storage extension. She says: 'I reluctantly chose to use donor sperm; I was literally crying on the computer trying to choose. But in November 2019 I had a stay of execution: I was prematurely infertile, allowing me to freeze my eggs for 55 years.'

'Extending the 10-year storage limit would put an end to the type of distress and agonising decision I faced when I came up against the limit. I, and other women, are confronted with the choice of fertilising eggs with donor sperm or sending them abroad (with all the added risks and costs that entails), or seeing them destroyed by the deadline when you know they were perfectly clinically viable. If the limited were extended it would lift a huge burden on what is sometimes already a really difficult journey.'

Carolyn froze her eggs 10 years ago. She is now a mother after becoming pregnant naturally but was forced to move her frozen eggs last year to avoid them being destroyed because of the 10-year storage limit. She says: 'Because of the 10-year storage limit I had to face having my eggs destroyed or take the costly and very inconvenient measure of moving them to another country. If I want to use them now, I'll have to undertake treatment in Spain – all because of an arbitrary piece of legislation.'

Jane (a pseudonym), froze over 20 eggs in 2009 and last year faced the destruction of her eggs only to receive a last-minute storage extension when she was diagnosed with premature infertility. She says: 'A change in the 10-year storage limit would have spared me from years of worry, anxiety and tough conversations with my partner, most particularly in the 12 months prior to the expiry date. My partner and I were not ready to start a family at the time. We could have opted to create embryos with the stored eggs, as this would legally permit a further 10 years storage, however this filled me with fear, what if my partner changed his mind? What if he refused to use them or, even worse, requested they be destroyed! These eggs are my last chance of having a family. I could have opted to use a sperm donor, but my desire has always been to have a family, not a baby, so this was not right for me.'

'The 10-year storage limit for social egg freezing is arbitrary and out-dated. This law creates unnecessary suffering for woman who, like me, are looking to start a family when the time and their situation is right.'

Sarah froze her eggs when she was 38 after a long-term relationship ended; she blogs about her egg freezing experience at <https://lifeloveandme.co.uk/> She says: 'I want future generations to have flexibility and freedom around their fertility and extending the 10-year storage limit on social egg freezing would reflect that wish. If any of my nieces wanted to egg freeze at 30, why shouldn't they decide to use their eggs at 43 (my current age), if that's where life's journey took them. It should be their choice, not another rule enforced by a group of people that have never been in that situation.'

TV presenter and scientist **Dr Emily Grossman**, 41, went through 4 cycles of egg freezing at age 38 in a bid to preserve her fertility. She says: 'There is no medical reason for eggs to be destroyed after 10 years. The 10-year storage limit is completely arbitrary. It is ludicrous that women who had the courage to break taboos and freeze their eggs 10 years ago are now facing the destruction of potentially their best chance of becoming a biological mother. I would be devastated if my eggs were destroyed at 48, if I wasn't in a position to be able to use them by then.'

Notes for editors

For media interviews and case studies, contact PET head of communications Catherine Hill at chill@progress.org.uk 07305-091466.

1. PET's #ExtendTheLimit campaign seeks to change the 10-year storage limit for eggs frozen for non-medical (social reasons). <https://www.progress.org.uk/extendthelimit>

PET believes the current legislation is unfair because if a woman wants to try to preserve her fertility, the best time to freeze her eggs is in her 20s but, under current UK law, women who freeze their eggs for non-medical reasons can only store them for 10 years. This means if a woman freezes her eggs when she is 28 she has to be ready to use them before she is 38; if she isn't she faces a limited number of distressing and potentially financially-crippling options: to have her eggs destroyed, and with them perhaps her best or only chance of becoming a biological mother; to become a parent before she is ready to do so, either with a partner or as a solo mum via sperm donation, or to try to fund the transfer of her eggs to a fertility clinic overseas and have fertility treatment abroad at a later date.

Why change is needed now

The proportion of women affected by the egg freezing legislation is increasing rapidly: in the UK, the number of women freezing their eggs more than tripled in the last five years. However, the current 10-year storage limit acts as a perverse incentive for women to delay freezing their eggs until their mid-to-late 30s when egg quality is declining and a woman's chance of becoming a biological mother has reduced – latest UK figures show two-thirds of women freezing their eggs are over 35. In this way, the 10-year storage limit promotes poor clinical practice – women seeking fertility preservation treatment in their late 30s or 40s typically need more ovarian stimulation and fertility treatment cycles to have a chance at success.

2. The Progress Educational Trust (PET) is a UK charity working to improve options for anyone affected by infertility or genetic conditions and advance public understanding of, and engagement with, science, law and ethics in the fields of human reproduction and genomics.
<https://www.progress.org.uk/>

3. PET organises free-to-attend events debating the responsible application of reproductive and genetic science and publishes BioNews, a free comment and news service. Subscribe to BioNews at <https://www.bionews.org.uk/subscribe>

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