



P-436 – Couples' representations of surplus frozen embryos: what influences decisions on embryo disposition options?

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Introduction: Several studies have confirmed the necessity to conduct in-depth qualitative research on the reasons leading to couples' decisions on disposition of surplus embryos. This study aims to better understand patients' representations of frozen embryos and how their emotional or symbolic views regarding their embryos may influence their disposition preferences. The objective is to provide keys for couples' counselling before and during IVF.

Materials and methods: A qualitative design including semi-structured, narrative, in-depth interviews was applied. 83 couples having frozen embryos in storage were invited by mail to participate in the study. These embryos were to reach the legal term for disposal one year later: 34 (41.4%) couples responded and 9 (10.9%) agreed to participate. The legislation foresees two disposition options: embryo transfer or disposal. However, the participants were asked whether donation for reproductive purposes or to research would be more acceptable, should the law allow it. Issues systematically explored included: couples' personal experiences of IVF, perceptions of embryos in general and specifically of their own, opinions on legal frameworks and disposition options. The sixty-minute interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results: Eighteen patients (9 couples) were interviewed. All had one or more children through IVF; one couple's child was spontaneously conceived. Differences between partners' perceptions of embryos were generally due to a disparity in the parental project. Often the woman presented an ambiguous wish for a child, which could be verbalised during the narration. In the absence of a parental project, embryos were mainly considered as biological material potentially useful for other couples, whereas a parental project, even badly defined, made of these embryos "nearly children", which made any donation or disposal unthinkable. Concerning possible donation, fluctuations between rational acceptance and emotional refusal were noted. Referring to non-specific embryos, most participants thought of donation to another couple as a good altruistic solution, which would also allow them to pay off the moral debt of IVF. Referring to their own embryos, with relational and genetic implications, they viewed donation to another couple "like abandoning a child"; donation to research was considered a preferable alternative to disposal. Emotional or symbolic views regarding embryos were analysed throughout the narratives: status of embryos fluctuated, passing through concepts as different as "biological material, pregnancy potential, reproduction of self or of couple, potential children, human beings, nearly babies, siblings". The ages of the born child and a future child stemming from the same batch of oocytes was often subject of confusion, as well as guessing the moment when "souls are embodied" in embryos. The number of frozen embryos, generally considered as a symbol of potency, could convey an additional difficulty in the decision process. Having viewed their embryos under the microscope before transfer was often perceived as a phenomenon responsible for an "impossible distinction of value between the born child and a frozen embryo."

Conclusions: The 18 parents interviewed were confronted with the options of embryo transfer or disposal. The semi-structured narratives showed that it is not so much the couples' embryo perceptions that guides the disposition option than the implicit parental project. These perceptions were different if couples considered their own or non-specific embryos. Their own embryos were

mainly considered as highly valuable human beings to whom they were emotionally linked, while embryos in general were more susceptible to be donated. The decision-making about surplus frozen embryos appeared quite complex, influenced by unconscious desires and personal meaningful experiences, such as having given birth, having many surplus embryos or having viewed one's own embryos. Issues related to possible surplus embryos should be explored with couples during counselling before and throughout treatment.

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