SEXUAL_HEALTH

Infertility in India: Breaking Barriers, Inspiring Change

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Infertility has quietly emerged as a crisis in India, affecting millions and changing societal norms surrounding family. Despite its significance as a public health issue, it remains cloaked in stigma. The combination of increased awareness, medical advancements, and government intervention is creating a brighter future. This article evaluates the present circumstances of infertility in India and explores future prospects.

The Hidden Struggle

In India, up to 27 million couples suffer from infertility, with primary infertility rates ranging from 3.9% to 16.8%, particularly high in urban areas. Yet, infertility is often shrouded in silence, with women unfairly shouldering the responsibility. In a culture where parenthood is highly valued, women experience feelings of shame, isolation, and anxiety. The financial strain is also substantial because treatments can be expensive and unaffordable for many.

Infertility has a range of causes. Female factors, including polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), endometriosis, and hormonal imbalances, account for 40% to 55% of cases. Male factors, including low sperm counts and ejaculation issues, make up 20% to 40%. Lifestyle choices like poor diet, delayed marriages, obesity, stress, smoking, and alcohol consumption further exacerbate infertility, especially in urban areas. Alarmingly, environmental pollution is also a contributing factor. Regrettably, infertility is often viewed as a personal shortcoming rather than a medical condition needing intervention.

Progress in Medical and Technological Solutions

Despite enormous obstacles, India's medical community has made significant progress in treating infertility. Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) has advanced considerably, particularly in vitro fertilization (IVF). Key advancements include time-lapse embryo imaging and artificial intelligence, which enhance embryo selection and improve IVF success rates. The trend of fertility preservation is becoming more popular, especially among women who choose to freeze their eggs for personal and professional reasons.

Specialized fertility clinics are proliferating in tier 1 and tier 2 cities, expanding access to treatments. Prominent players like CK Birla Healthcare, Nova IVF, and Apollo Fertility are leading this expansion and raising the standard of care. These clinics use advanced technologies to select the healthiest embryos, further boosting success rates.

Start-ups are also transforming the scenery by offering hormone-tracking apps, home fertility tests, and genetic screening kits. This shift empowers individuals with the knowledge necessary for informed reproductive decisions. Additionally, the rising trend of egg and sperm freezing indicates a shift in societal norms towards family planning.

Government Initiatives and Regulations

A pivotal moment came in December 2021, when the Indian Parliament passed the Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Act and the Surrogacy (Regulation) Act. These laws aim to standardize ART procedures and establish oversight boards at both national and state levels. However, implementation has been

sluggish, and further efforts are necessary to integrate infertility treatment into public healthcare frameworks. Current initiatives like the RMNCH+A program prioritize maternal and child health but fail to address infertility adequately as a health concern.

A Changing Market and the Road Ahead

The global ART market is flourishing, with India experiencing significant growth. The Indian ART market is projected to expand from approximately USD 1,135.4 million in 2023 to USD 1,963.4 million by 2030, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.1%. In 2023, the culture media segment led market revenues, with growth expected in disposable devices due to innovations enhancing sterility. Advancements in genetic testing have strengthened the frozen non-donor segment, while growing demand is expected to boost the rapid growth of the fresh donor segment. Medical tourism is also rising, as patients seek affordable, high-quality fertility treatments in India.

Nevertheless, obstacles remain. Treatment costs can be prohibitive, and health insurance rarely covers ART procedures comprehensively. Additionally, a shortage of trained specialists in smaller towns and inconsistent success rates add to the difficulties couples encounter.

A Future Full of Possibilities

Despite the challenges, growing awareness is helping to dispel myths around infertility, and clinics are increasingly offering emotional and psychological support to improve outcomes. Expanding insurance coverage, providing affordable treatment options, and integrating infertility care into primary healthcare will be essential in making treatment accessible for more families.

In a country where family is cherished, ensuring that infertility treatment is widely available could transform lives. As India embraces innovation, openly addressing infertility is vital to creating a future where resilience and medical progress redefine reproductive health.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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