

EXCLUSIVE:

The IVF clampdown: Cash-strapped health authority will only help women left infertile from cancer treatment and HIV patients start a family

- Richmond CCG has created new proposals for the local community to vote on
- In its plans, fertility treatment could be off the cards for thousands of women
- Only those left infertile from cancer treatment and suffering from chronic viruses such as HIV could access it
- Experts fear if the plans go ahead then other CCGs could follow suit
- Critics argue those who would be given access could face a reduced life expectancy

IVF could be limited to just HIV patients and cancer survivors left infertile after treatment, if controversial new plans go ahead.

In light of the NHS financial crisis, Richmond CCG in south-west London is proposing to change its policy on who will be eligible to receive fertility treatment.

It has stated it needs to make £13million in savings in the next financial year – and IVF will be the first service to be slashed.

As a result, it is now considering prohibiting infertile women from seeking treatment on the NHS unless they have been affected by cancer treatment or chronic viral infections such as HIV or human papilloma virus.

Cancer treatments are widely known to have the potential to affect a woman's fertility.

Chemotherapy has the ability to stop the body from producing hormones required, while radiation has been found to damage the lining of the womb in some cases.

But experts fear if the plans do go ahead then other clinical commissioning groups across the country will follow suit - preventing many couples from starting their dream family.

Other critics argue those who would be given access could face a reduced life expectancy due to their health status – raising the risk of a child potentially being left without parents.

Consultant gynaecologist and fertility specialist, Dr Luciano Nardo, warned imposing such drastic new limits was 'short-sighted' and 'devastating' for any couples affected.

Dr Nardo, director of Cheshire's Reproductive Health Group clinic, said: 'I'm extremely surprised by this proposal from Richmond CCG.

'And what really shocks me is the group of patients identified for treatment are potentially the ones where life expectancy is a real issue due to their health issues, which brings into play all manner of questions about future child welfare.'

He continued: 'The cuts to IVF funding have been deep and the situation has become a true postcode lottery. And it's having a real impact on those looking to start a family.'

'Restricting IVF provision in the manner Richmond CCG are proposing is not only short-sighted, but it is devastating for those couples desperate to achieve their dreams of having a child.'

'Infertility is recognised as a disease and should be treated as such.'

Currently, IVF is only offered on the NHS if certain criteria are met.

Patients who don't are usually left with no alternative but to pay for private treatment.

In 2013, NICE published new fertility guidelines about who should have access to the treatment in England and Wales.

However, individual CCGs make the final decision about who can access it in their local area, and their criteria may be stricter.

The latest news comes just weeks Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG proposed withdrawing all IVF fertility treatment on the NHS – a move it said would save £1m a year.

And just last week, three health trusts in the West Midlands area announced they were drastically tightening their surgery eligibility criteria in the hope of slashing operations by a fifth and saving £2million a year.

Patients will now be denied hip or knee replacements unless their pain is so severe they cannot sleep through the night.

Now, in a new document seen by MailOnline, local residents have been asked by Richmond CCG, which is responsible for the funding of 28 GP practices in area, for their opinion on the level of IVF provision in the borough.

The move follows an initial consultation last December where they were asked to select one of the following services to be targeted in order to free up cash: the prescribing of gluten-free foods, vitamin D, baby milk and self-care medication; supporting patients to be surgery ready and for IVF and ICSI.

Under the new proposals, the CCG has set out two options for the local community to choose between.

The first would mean no change to the existing guidelines, with women aged 39 or under who meet the criteria to continuing to be offered one fresh and one frozen cycle of IVF.

But the CCG has warned if it proceeds with this option, other areas of healthcare will be targeted for savings.

The second option is that IVF access 'would be limited to patients who are infertile following cancer treatment, or to prevent transmission of chronic viral infections (such as HIV).'

However, it says in exceptional circumstances it will consider individual funding requests from GPs who think a particular patient is exceptionally worthy.

The CCG is also asking the community if there are any other specific circumstances IT should consider.

Dr Graham Lewis, chairman of the CCG, said: 'We are facing our toughest financial challenge yet.

'There is not enough money for us to do everything we would like to for people living in the borough of Richmond.

'We have to prioritise and make difficult decisions, including what level of IVF should continue to be funded, to secure the future of local NHS health services for everyone.

'While we know the number of people affected by a change in policy would be low, we are also aware infertility is an area of significant concern to those who are affected by it.

'We need to make sure that we understand the views and needs of people who use IVF services so if you haven't already done so, please read our consultation document and fill out our survey.'

Professor Adam Balen, chair of the British Fertility Society, told MailOnline: 'It is disheartening to read that Richmond Clinical Commissioning Group is proposing to limit fertility treatment to women left infertile from cancer treatment and chronic viruses.

'Infertility, a condition which affects one in seven couples, can have a devastating effect on people's lives, causing distress, depression, and the breakdown of relationships. IVF treatment is cost-effective and should be available on the NHS.'

Susan Seenan, chief executive of Fertility Network UK, added: 'Richmond CCG is failing fertility patients by proposing to cut NHS IVF treatment; removing the 1 IVF cycle it currently offers would be devastating for those unable to have a baby without medical help.

'Facing fertility problems is hard enough, without being denied medical help because of where you live.'

The leading HIV/Aids charity, the Terrence Higgins Trust, declined to comment when approached by MailOnline.

WHEN IVF IS OFFERED

IVF is only offered on the NHS if certain criteria are met. If you don't meet these criteria, you may need to pay for private treatment.

In 2013, the NICE published new fertility guidelines that made recommendations about who should have access to the treatment on the NHS in England and Wales.

However, individual NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups make the final decision about who can access it in their local area, and their criteria may be stricter.

According to NICE, women aged under 40 should be offered three cycles of IVF treatment on the NHS if: they've been trying to get pregnant through regular unprotected sex for two years, or they've not been able to get pregnant after 12 cycles of artificial insemination. If you turn 40 during treatment, the current cycle will be completed, but further cycles should not be offered.

If tests show that IVF is the only treatment likely to help you get pregnant, you should be referred for IVF straight away.

Source: [NHS Choices](#)