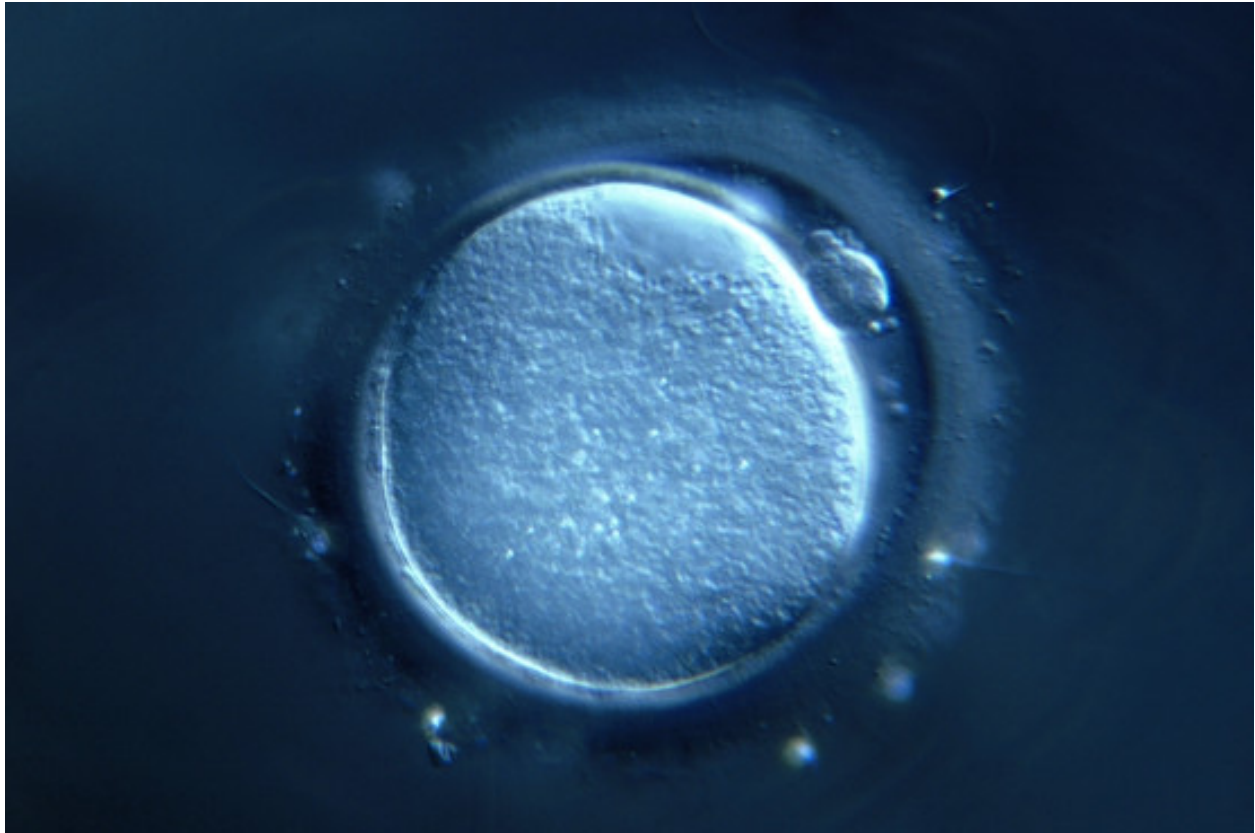


The Ethics of Egg Freezing



A world in which ambitious young women are encouraged to freeze their eggs is not going to finally solve the vexing challenge of 'having it all.' *Getty Images*

By **CHRISTINE ROSEN**

May 3, 2013 7:20 p.m. ET

[FOCUS QUESTION:] Is there anything ethically troubling about healthy young women freezing their eggs for later use?

Proponents argue that it is merely another choice on the growing menu of fertility treatments. Thanks to freezing techniques, women's eggs are no longer a finite resource with a built-in expiration date. And like contraception, egg freezing further levels the playing field with men, allowing women to have children when it suits them rather than when biology demands.

But a better analogy for egg freezing may be cosmetic surgery. In response to new social expectations, like the idea that the female face should remain unmarked by time, millions

of women have chosen surgery to arrest the physical deterioration caused by normal aging. Egg freezing is the reproductive equivalent of this denial, and it, too, promises a technological fix for a complicated, unavoidable aspect of the human condition.

Debates about how much the government and private institutions should do to help people manage their home and work responsibilities have raged for decades, but there is no avoiding the fact that the years when people dedicate time and energy to their educations and careers are also the time of peak fertility for men and women. A world in which ambitious young women are encouraged to freeze their eggs is not going to finally solve the vexing challenge of "having it all." In fact, if adopted as a social expectation, egg freezing could undermine arguments for greater workplace accommodation and flexibility for women with children.

Because egg freezing requires the use of in vitro fertilization for future pregnancies, its widespread adoption would also likely increase the use of pre-implantation sex selection and genetic diagnosis, practices which pose a range of ethical dilemmas. If your eggs are getting thawed out and fertilized in vitro, why not be certain you are getting just the child you want by choosing its sex or making sure she isn't genetically predisposed to, say, depression or cancer? Many of the fertility clinics that market egg-freezing services already offer options for screening.

As a cultural matter, the emphasis on parental control in egg freezing could lead to subtle shifts in our attitudes about having and raising children. Control changes our expectations. If you order shoes in brown leather and receive them in pink suede, you're rightfully annoyed. But human beings cannot be made to order, at least not yet, and they are rarely born at convenient times and without physical imperfections. Egg freezing offers yet another technique of control in the process of having children. The more control we have, the more we expect the end result—the child—to turn out the way we want it to, and the greater our disappointment when he does not.

Assuming there are no long-term health risks to egg freezing, none of these ethical challenges justifies banning or restricting the practice. But individual choices have broader consequences, and a society in which young women routinely freeze their eggs could develop very different attitudes about children and the arc of a human life. The danger lies not in a particular technology but in how it might allow us to indulge our hubris and pretend that we and our families are not subject to the relentless march of time.

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