

Advising patients about single embryo transfer (SET)

A single, healthy baby should be the goal of all fertility treatment, and we know that multiple pregnancy is the biggest risk to the health of babies conceived by IVF, yet many patients still see a twin pregnancy as an ideal outcome. How do you persuade them that this is not the case?

A recent patient questionnaire from the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority (HFEA) showed that the majority of patients who had opted for SET had done so because that was what they had been advised to do by their clinic, and they had trusted the clinic's opinion on the issue. Statistics about the potential risks had not been the major deciding factor.

You hold the key to altering the patient perspective. You should raise the issue at the start of the treatment process, and continue to deliver a consistent message throughout. It is vital that all members of staff give the same advice to patients. If **you** believe that the patient in front of you should have SET, your patients will follow your lead.

Answering some common concerns

There has been some misunderstanding about the move towards SET and what is involved. Patients may be resistant to the idea, especially those who have concerns about the financial implications and the impact on success rates. You may find that you need to have answers to some of the common questions that can arise.

Isn't the aim to get everyone to have one embryo transferred?

SET is not right for everyone, and the decision should always be taken on an individual basis. Every clinic has a strategy in place to reduce the risk of multiple births, and we only recommend SET for those who are most at risk of a multiple pregnancy. A number of relevant factors may be considered such as your age and the quality of your embryos.

I've heard SET is really just about saving money on NHS care for premature babies?

It's not about saving money - it's about saving lives. Babies are only in specialist neonatal intensive care units because they have serious complications. Half of all twins are born prematurely and are of low birth weight, which means they are more likely to need specialist medical help. SET is about increasing the numbers of healthy IVF babies.

Why are IVF patients being penalised by having to have single embryo transfer?

In the past, IVF patients have sometimes had to take unnecessary risks just because they had problems getting pregnant. If you are offered SET you are not being penalised - you are being given the chance to avoid the major risk associated with IVF, a multiple pregnancy.

I'm fit and healthy, and therefore willing to take the risk of having twins

Being fit and healthy does not mean that you will avoid complications with a multiple pregnancy, most of which are related to prematurity. No one wants to risk damage to their own child if it can be avoided.

I know lots of twins who are fine and I think the risks are being exaggerated

Many twins are fine, but it is not always appreciated that many others are not. Naturally, there is only a 1-2% chance of having a twin pregnancy, but after IVF this had risen to 25%. This meant that the risks of problem pregnancies, of miscarriage, of disability and of death were unacceptably high, too. It is quite possible to reduce the multiple birth rate while giving a similar chance of success if patients are selected carefully.

I can't afford to pay for lots of treatment. Surely if I have two embryos put back, I will double my chances of getting pregnant?

Putting two embryos back doesn't double the chances of getting pregnant, but it does increase the risk of a multiple pregnancy. If clinics choose patients carefully, success rates can be maintained by carrying out SET and freezing any remaining embryos to transfer later.

It is my right to choose how many embryos to put back - you can't decide that on my behalf

As a medical professional, I am responsible for your health and that of any future baby. I cannot risk causing unnecessary damage to your child or to you by putting back two embryos if you have a high chance of having a multiple pregnancy.

I'd rather have twins than no baby at all

If you were going to get pregnant with twins, you would have got pregnant with a SET.

More detailed information about the risks to mothers and babies of a multiple pregnancy can be found at: www.multiplebirths.org.uk and www.oneatatime.org.uk

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