

Surrogacy still stigmatized, though attitudes changing among younger women

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Although younger people are becoming more positive towards surrogate mothers, current day attitudes to surrogacy are still broadly negative, a scientist will tell the 24th annual conference of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology tomorrow (Monday 7 July). Professor Olga van den Akker, from the Department of Psychology, Middlesex University, Hendon, London, UK, will say that previous stigmatisation of surrogate mothers in the media had added to the reluctance to undertake this treatment option.

Together with colleague Miss Aimée Poote, from the University of Warwick Medical School, Coventry, UK, she set out to study current day attitudes to surrogacy among 187 women chosen from the general population. Only 8 out of the 187 were willing to become genetic surrogate mothers, and 9 gestational surrogates. Significant differences were found in age, with younger women being more willing, and with parity; women who were unsure about the idea of surrogacy were less likely to have had children, whereas those who were potentially willing and those who were unwilling were more likely to have had them.

Attitudes towards advertising for surrogates, the consequences of surrogacy, and factors that induce women to become surrogates differed between groups, as did reasons for wanting to become parents themselves. "Women who were potentially willing to become surrogates were more likely to say that they would be happy to be identified as the surrogate to the couple and the child," says Professor van den Akker. "Those who thought that parenthood was very important were also more likely to be willing to help others to become parents like themselves." According to Professor van den Akker, this shows that potential surrogates do this because they value families and parenthood and not because they hold unusual ideas about having children.

"We need to do further research with larger

numbers," says Professor van den Akker, "to enable us to see whether the attitudes we found translate into actual behaviour. Interestingly, we found that the group who was definitely not interested in becoming a surrogate mother also scored significantly more negatively on advertising, inducements, and the consequences of surrogacy. They also rated reasons for not wishing to have a child such as 'parenthood restricts careers', and 'parenthood is not the most important goal in life', higher than potential surrogates." The researchers say that this would seem to imply that these negative feelings towards surrogacy and parenthood in general are held by that part of the population which is not involved with surrogacy. These factors are likely to influence the reports of stigma associated with surrogacy, and it is possible that this could be overcome by linking alternative means of becoming a family to positive (rather than negative) family values.

"We also believe that, as surrogacy becomes less stigmatised, families who have children born in this way will be more likely to disclose the means of conception, not just to their children, but also to their family and friends, leaving them in better psychological health," says Professor van den Akker.

"These findings will help de-stigmatise surrogate motherhood, and aid those who are already disadvantaged through being infertile to disclose use of assisted conception to others. We were pleased to find a more positive attitude towards the idea of surrogate mothers, perhaps because society as a whole is becoming more familiar with 'alternative' ways to have a family," she says.

Source: European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology

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