

# THE CLOCK IS TICKING

Delayed Pregnancy and the “Epidemic” of Infertility  
in the United States  
1975-1990

Jenna Healey  
Yale University

*Infertility in History, Science, and Culture*  
July 3-5, 2013  
University of Edinburgh



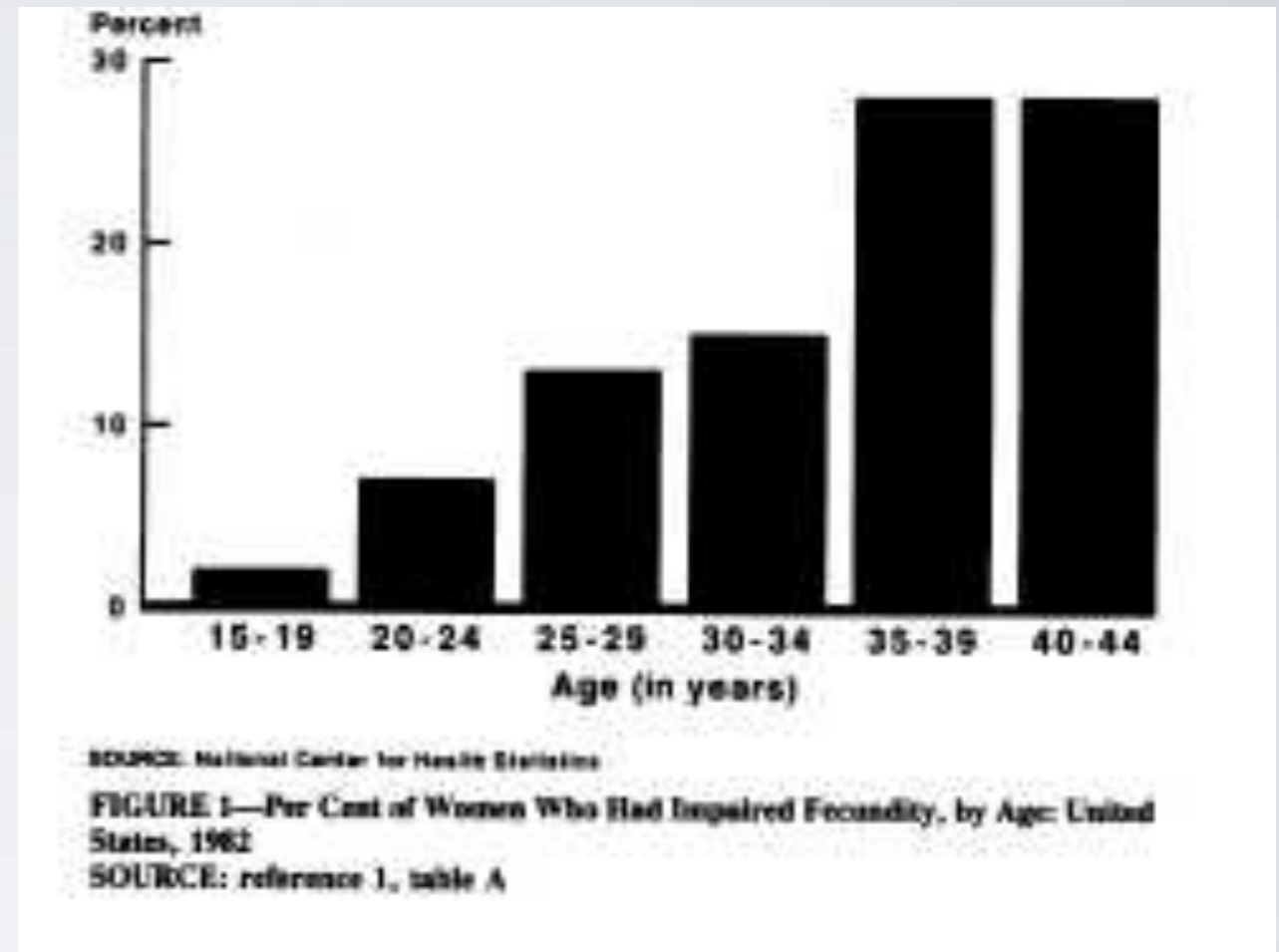
"...the generation that managed to gleefully separate sex and procreation finds to its sorrow that the two cannot always be reunited."



"Baby Fever", LIFE Magazine, June 1987

# AN EPIDEMIC OF INFERTILITY?

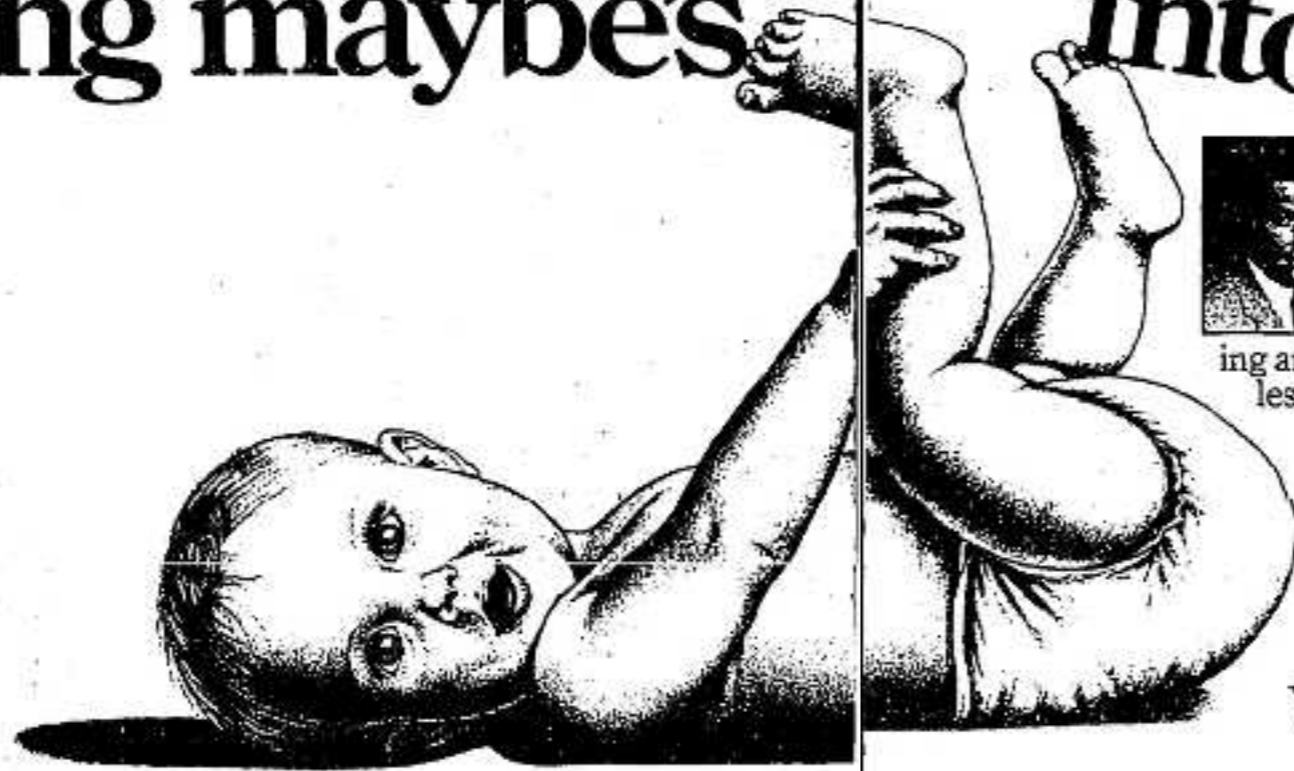
- Claims that the incidence of infertility had increased dramatically since the 1950s
- Estimates that 1 in 5 married couples, or 10 million Americans, were now infertile



# WHY DID INFERTILITY APPEAR TO BE INCREASING?

- Size of the baby boom cohort: a higher absolute number of infertile people (while the proportion remained the same)
- Higher visibility of infertility and reproductive technologies in the media
- Larger proportion of patients seeking out treatment for infertility

# Turning maybe's *into* babies.



Infertility has become a national epidemic. For over 20% of all couples, having children is an "iffy" proposition.

But today, new advances in microsurgery, fertility research, embryo transplants and surrogate mothering are giving hope to thousands of childless couples.

This week, in a special 3-part report, Health Editor Steve Gendel takes a close look at the latest scientific miracle—childbirth.

**2**  
**NEWS**  
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**BEGINS TONIGHT AT 6:00**

**We still treat news as if it matters.**

# OUTLINE

I. A Brief History of Infertility Epidemics

II. Age of Infertility

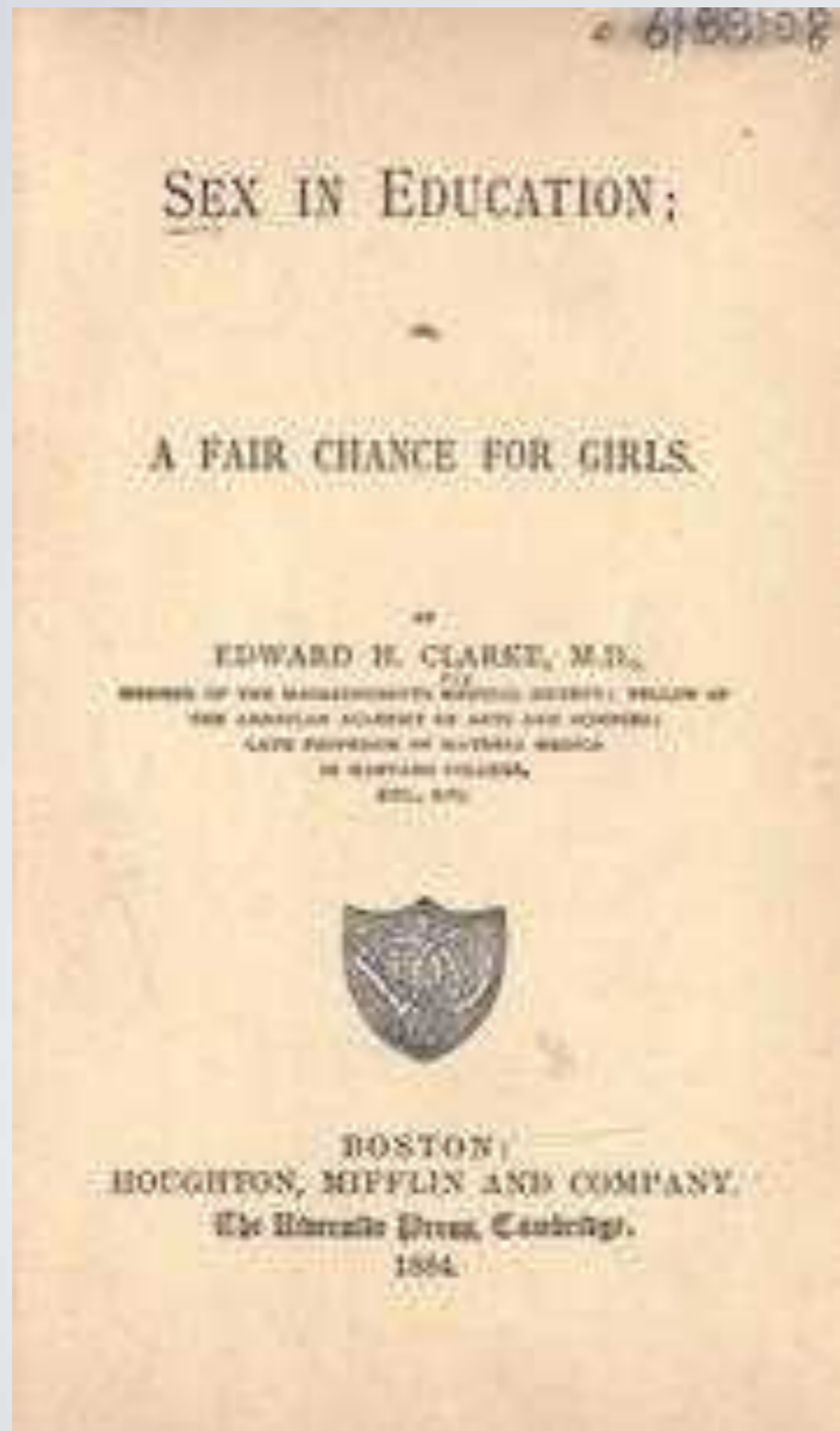
III. The Biological Clock



# A BRIEF HISTORY OF INFERTILITY EPIDEMICS



# EDUCATION AND STERILITY



Edward H. Clarke,  
*Sex in Education*  
1873

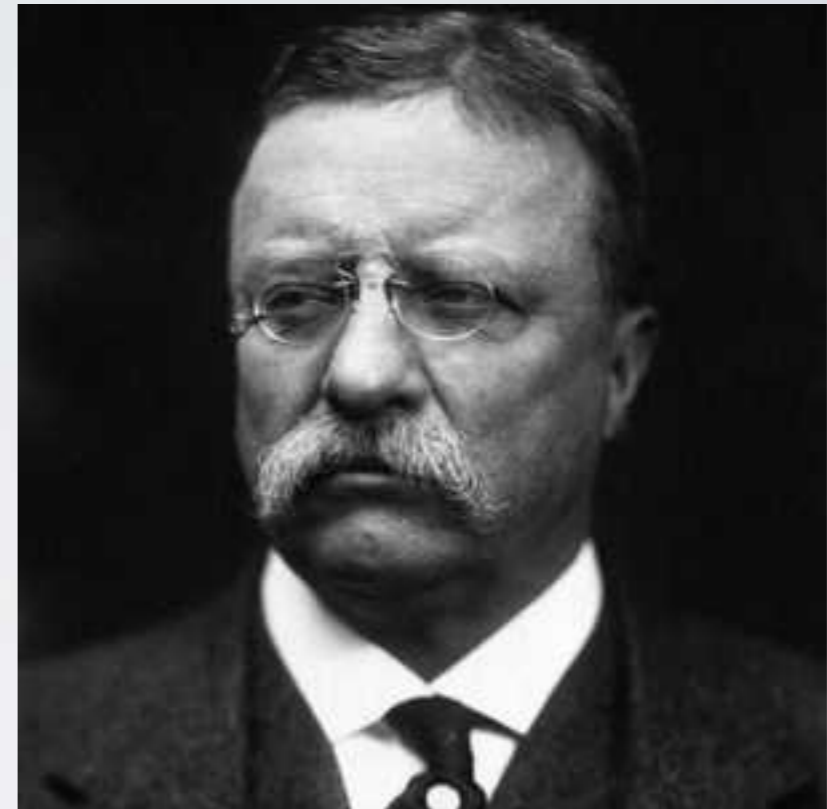
# RACE SUICIDE

A DISTURBING POSSIBILITY



STORK: "Well, if folks prefer Teddy Bears I s'pose I'll have to meet the demand"

(July 9, 1907)



President  
Theodore Roosevelt

# POSTWAR BABY BUST?



"Nature has all too often become tired of being turned away, and the Gate of Life is closed."

Thurman B. Rice,  
*Modern Home Medical Adviser*, 1944

# ENDOMETRIOSIS



Dr. Joseph V. Meigs

**Have Children Before  
26 to Beat Sterility,  
Says Harvard Doctor**

Boston Globe, October 21 1948

"...a social phenomenon  
foreshadowing the decline in  
our civilization."

*now  
doctors  
know  
why*



*she  
can't  
have  
children*

**The facts about "a new dimension of our illness"**

**now told to women in Ladies' Home Journal**

Over 400,000 the last year of the most serious illness. Research about bleeding, childbearing and  
any, has been turned into this first-of-its-kind journal, and for every who suffer  
throughout their lives is a new day of hope and joy. Doctors' knowledge about the disease  
and the latest research findings are now available to you.

"Researcher William G. O'Brien" In his second volume, Ladies' Home Journal tells the story of O'Brien-  
house. It is a story of hope and optimism, not only for women who are  
in all periods. For today's world, today's women and tomorrow's children.

Doctors, young women everywhere. The latest, most authoritative medical information that you  
about their lives is just one of the many of the Journal's latest information. It's about  
new medicines, great and small. From the Journal's Life to the Journal's Life. It's about  
today—from the Journal's Life to the Journal's Life. It's about  
the Journal's Life to the Journal's Life. It's about the Journal's Life to the Journal's Life.

For every woman who has fought the disease, for every man who  
wishes to be the best doctor in the world.

Chicago Tribune, August 28, 1951

# THE AGE OF INFERTILITY





Katie and Edward Barry are still childless after six years of marriage and many frustrating medical treatments.

# Anguished Search to Cure Infertility

Medical advances offer new hope, but infertility afflicts more couples than ever.

By Denis Kleiman

They arrive one by one at the back door, moving through the night, afraid to be recognized by the neighbors. A woman answers and they enter, awkwardly taking their places on the brown corduroy couch, clutching their overcoats to their laps like armor. One lights a cigarette. Another twists the ends of her hair.

These are not women to whom big emotions come easily. Shame is a feeling they have learned to keep to themselves. But here they are: strangers to each other, they have come to this home in Great Neck, L. I., to share their most painful anguish, an intimacy they have disclosed to very few. Their need to speak is tangible.

"It's the idea that you don't have the option," a woman in an armchair says. "It hurts me."

"It's that feeling of helplessness. I chose my husband. I chose where I want to live. But now I can't choose. I've lost control."

"The feeling of paralysis," the woman with the cigarette says, "is terrible. I can't go on with my life because, in my heart of hearts, I think it will happen. I really do. I think if I just wait a little longer, the whole thing will blow over."

These women in their 30's alternate between nervous laughter and tears. Passing around a box of Kleenex, they speak of guilt, failure, disgrace and fleeing time. They feel cheated. They question their femininity and moan the emptiness of their future. These women are incapable of having children.

□

While much of the world worries about preventing unwanted births, millions of other people are struggling with the opposite problem: bearing the children they want. In this country alone, an estimated 10 million individual men and women between the ages of 35 and 40 experience difficulty either in conceiving a child or in carrying a pregnancy to term—a number that experts say is growing.

Although there have always been couples unable to have children, today's life styles and careers have aggravated infertility in new proportions. The tendency for women to postpone childbearing into their 30's, when fertility generally decreases, the epidemic rise in venereal disease, as well as—ironically—current methods of birth control have all contributed to a sharp rise in infertility. Three decades ago, one out of 50 couples was believed to have difficulty bearing children; today, experts estimate, that figure is one out of six—an increase that reflects not only exacerbated physiological problems but also the greater willingness of infertile couples to seek medical help.

"Infertility is a problem of modern society," says Dr. Alvin F. Goldfarb, a (Continued on Page 6)

Denis Kleiman is a reporter for The New York Times.

# THE TREND OF DELAYED CHILDBIRTH

## More Women Having First Child in 30's

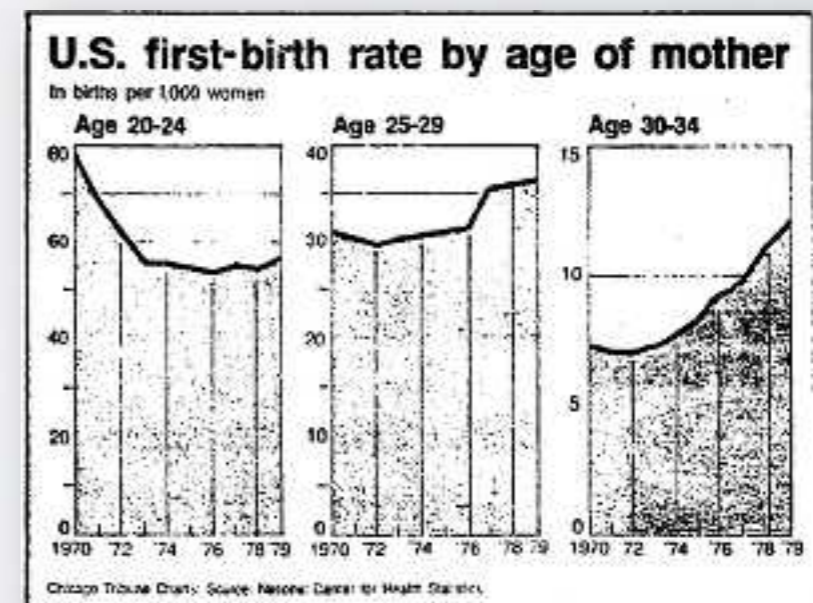
By MARJORIE HUNTER  
Special to The New York Times  
WASHINGTON, May 27 — The  
number of self-reported American

The study, based on information  
from birth certificates, showed that  
the number of first births to women in  
their 30's more than doubled during

so, as recently as 1960, such births  
were relatively few.  
— because delayed childbearing was

weight babies — less than 5 pounds, 8  
ounces — medical authorities say that  
the ideal age for a mother to give birth  
for the first time is between 22 and 28.

*Early-30s set having  
a delayed baby boom*



# **FEMALE FECUNDITY AS A FUNCTION OF AGE**

## **Results of Artificial Insemination in 2193 Nulliparous Women with Azoospermic Husbands**

**FÉDÉRATION CECOS,\* D. SCHWARTZ, PH.D.,  
AND M. J. MAYAUX, B.A.**

**T**HE decrease in the fecundity of women who have passed a certain age is generally acknowledged, but supporting data on natural reproduction are scarce. (We use the term “fecundity” in the sense of ‘capacity for procreation’; “fertility” denotes actual

Schwartz, D., and M. J. Mayaux. “Female Fecundity as a Function of Age.” *New England Journal of Medicine* 306, no. 7 (1982): 404–406.

# INFERTILITY AND AGE

*Infertility: The Risk Increases With Age*

## **BYE-BYE, MS. AMERICAN PIE**

Panic is sweeping a generation of women  
getting too old to have children

**BY CHRISTINE MOORE**

**The fertility myth:  
Conception not as  
easy as most think**

# CAUTION

## YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE AGE OF INFERTILITY

THE PROBLEM  
USED TO BE  
HOW NOT TO  
HAVE A BABY.  
BUT THE  
INFERTILITY  
EPIDEMIC IS  
COMING—AND  
ITS VICTIMS ARE  
GETTING  
YOUNGER ALL  
THE TIME

**R**

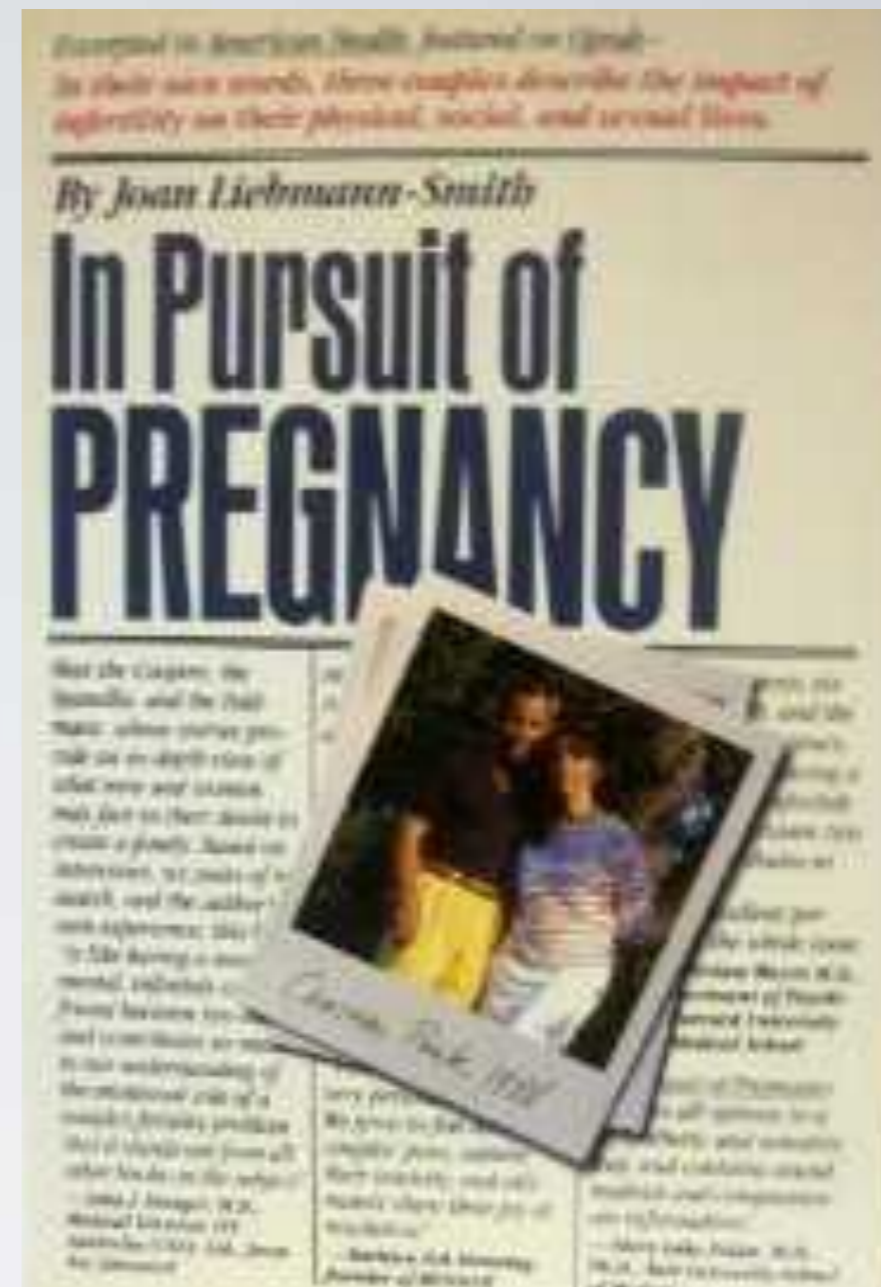
ight now, you're not interested in having a baby; you've got all you can do to establish a career and develop a lasting relationship with one man. But if you're like most young women, you assume you will be able to conceive a child when you want to. That is no longer a safe assumption to make.

An estimated ten million people in the United States are now infertile—meaning, according to the definition doctors use, that they have

tried unsuccessfully for a year or more to conceive a child. Visits to fertility experts have doubled

By Laura Flynn McCarthy

# PROFILING OLDER COUPLES



these three:

- **Roy Cooper, a 41-year-old cinematographer and his wife, Mai Li, 31, a sportswear buyer**
- **Anthony Spanelli, 39, a computer programmer and his wife, Sue, 39, a psychologist**
- **Eric Feldman, 36, an orthopedic surgeon, and his 31-year-old wife, Lisa, a secretary**

# VD AND INFERTILITY

- Large increases in infertility among 20 to 24 year olds

**Disease control experts warn of VD-linked sterility epidemic**

**Sexually transmitted ills raise risk of female sterility**

**VD causing infertility among women**

# THE BIOLOGICAL CLOCK



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RICHARD COHEN

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## *The Clock Is Ticking For the Career Woman*

**C**OMPOSITE WOMAN (actually, several women at different times) is coming to lunch. There she is, entering the restaurant. She's the pretty one. Dark hair. Medium height. Nicely dressed. Now she is taking off her coat. Nice figure. She sits and begins with a status report. The job is just wonderful. She is feeling just wonderful. It is wonderful being her age, which is something between 27 and 35. And the fact of the matter, in case you should wonder, is that there is a new man in her life and he, like everything else, is truly wonderful. Then she looks down.

Is there something wrong? Composite Woman says nothing. I ask again. Again she says nothing. Finally I do the you-can-talk-to-me bit.

"Off the record?"

"Absolutely."

"I want to have a baby."

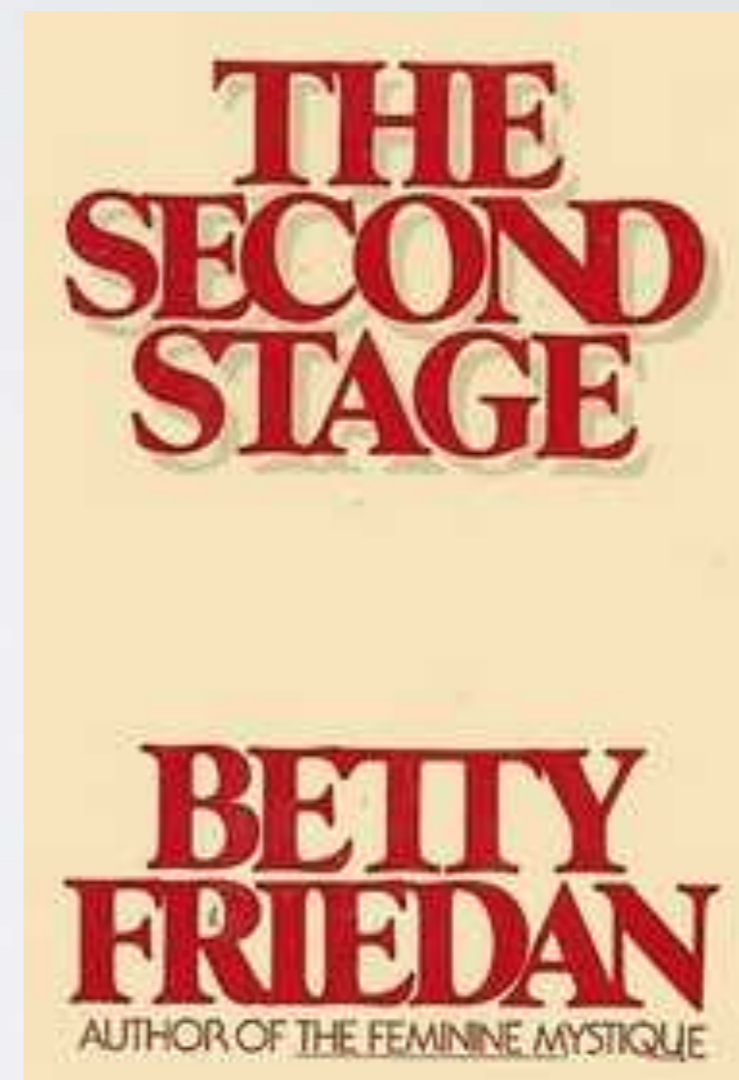
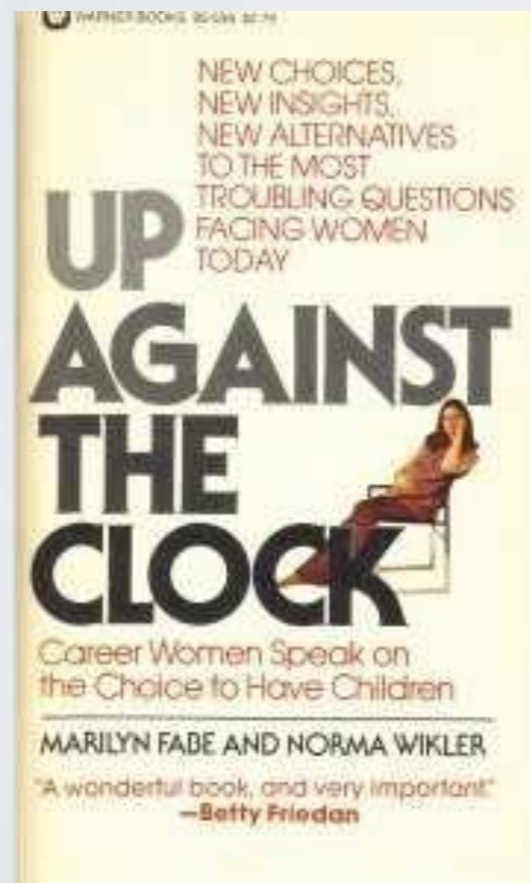
Sometimes, the Composite Woman is married and sometimes she is not. Sometimes, horribly, there is no man in the horizon. What there is always, though, is a feeling that the clock is ticking. A decision will have to be made. A decision that will stick forever. You hear it wherever you go. Women all over are singing their own version of September song.

I've gone around, a busy bee of a reporter, from



Richard Cohen, "The Clock Is Ticking For the Career Woman: Biological Time Clock Can Create Real Panic." *The Washington Post* Washington, D.C., March 16, 1978

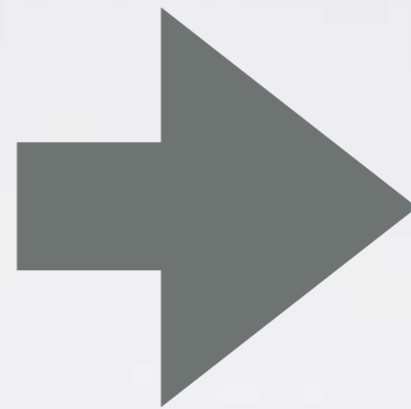
A generation  
of women "up  
against the  
clock..."



# THE EVOLUTION OF A METAPHOR

Late 1970 to  
Early 1980s

- The decision whether to have a child or remain childless
- The risk of childbearing after 35



Late 1980s

- Planning for pregnancy before time ran out
- The risk of unanticipated age related infertility

# SAFEGUARDING FUTURE FERTILITY

## THE PREVENTION OF INFERTILITY

### A REPORT ON A PROPOSED METHOD TO PREVENT INFERTILITY: SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF RISK FOR INFERTILITY

#### PREPARED BY:

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Revised: September 10, 1987

WARNING: There are no restrictions on copying or referencing this report. However, this plan (program) shall not be implemented in whole or in part without the expressed written permission of the author: Michael R. Soules, M.D., and the University of Washington

# SAFEGUARDING FUTURE FERTILITY

*"To some extent, induction of anxiety cannot be avoided and can be helpful in the sense that anxiety becomes the force that moves people to follow through with their suggested behavior regarding their fertility."*



# ADVANCING AGE DECREASES YOUR ABILITY TO HAVE CHILDREN.

While women and their partners must be the ones to decide the best time when (and if) to have children, women in their twenties and early thirties are most likely to conceive. Infertility is a disease affecting 6.1 million people in the United States.

**GET THE FACTS**

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR REPRODUCTIVE MEDICINE

American Society for Reproductive Medicine

Protect Your Fertility Campaign  
2001

# CONCLUSION



# Research Refutes Perceived 'Infertility Epidemic'

*Study Suggests Social, Not Physical Causes Are Affecting Women's Ability to Have Children*

Los Angeles Times

Despite a widespread perception that infertility is rapidly increasing in the United States, the rate actually has remained stable in recent years and among married couples has declined, government researchers reported yesterday.

In 1988, 4.9 million American women between the ages of 15 and 44 had "an impaired ability" to have children, according to a study by the National Center for Health Statistics. That represents 8.4 percent of women in that age group—the same percentage as in 1982.

The mistaken perception that America is experiencing an "epidemic of infertility" could reflect demographic and social changes affecting some groups of women more than others, the study suggested.

For example, the number of childless women between the ages of 25 and 44 with impaired ability to

ability to conceive and the ability to carry a pregnancy to term.

The study said that about 2.2 million women who had never had children had impaired fecundity in 1988, along with 2.7 million women who had given birth at least once. In 1982, the figures were 1.9 million and 2.6 million respectively, the study said.

Among married couples, the overall rate of infertility decreased from 11.2 percent in 1965 to 8.5 percent in 1982 and to 7.9 percent in 1988, the study said.

About 2.3 million married women

between the ages of 15 and 44 were infertile in 1988, or slightly fewer than one in 12, the study said. These figures were not significantly different from the findings in 1982, the study said.

"The number of women suffering from infertility has increased, but the population base has also increased. The incidence of infertility has not," said Joyce Zeitz, a spokeswoman for the American Fertility Society.

The study results were based on a series of surveys conducted periodically by the National Center for

Health Statistics, a branch of the Department of Health and Human Services. The 1988 survey involved personal interviews with 8,450 women.

"In some popular descriptions of infertility, it has been suggested that there are nine or 10 million infertile couples, that one in six couples is infertile, that infertility is increasing rapidly, or that there is an 'epidemic' of infertility in the United States," the report said. "The findings of this report indicate that these perceptions are inaccurate."

Washington Post, December 7 1990



# THANK YOU

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Social Sciences and Humanities  
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