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SYMPOSIUM: THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST IVF BIRTHS

The Oldham Notebooks: an analysis of the development of IVF 1969–1978. V. The role of Jean Purdy reassessed


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Abstract The role of Jean Purdy in the work leading to the birth of Louise Brown is assessed. We report that Purdy: (i) recorded and organized most of the data systematically; (ii) probably spent longer working in Oldham than did Edwards; (iii) whilst there, was primarily responsible for organizing laboratory supplies, including media preparation and testing; (iv) was involved in patient care; and (v) was a major source of support to Edwards. We find that Purdy, despite her nursing qualification, was not involved in laparoscopic egg retrieval and clinical aspects, but was focused on basic research activities. The evidence on who was present at embryo transfers is less clear, but suggests that Edwards was present for all, whereas Purdy may have been absent for some. Overall, we conclude that Purdy's role was a highly significant and under-appreciated element in the achievement of IVF in Oldham. 

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KEYWORDS: Edwards and Steptoe, IVF, Louise Brown, Oldham, Purdy

Introduction

Louise Joy Brown was the first baby born of an IVF procedure on 25 July 1978. Our analysis of research notes from the period from 1969 leading up to this event has described our archival research on the clinical and scientific aspects of the work. In those papers we reported on the numbers of patients and treatment cycles involved, and documented

the evidence underlying the approaches used to try to resolve the problems encountered (Elder and Johnson, 2015a,b,c). We also described our research into the ethical practice of Edwards and Steptoe over this period (Johnson and Elder, 2015a). In this paper, we analyse the organizational aspects of the notebooks that lead us to re-evaluate the role played by Jean Purdy in this programme of research.

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Materials and methods

The data were abstracted from notebooks and loose paper sheets and scraps, anonymized and analysed as described in [Elder and Johnson \(2015a\)](#), which also describes the archival sources used. Briefly, these include archives at Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC), and papers relating to the late Patrick Steptoe, now in the possession of his son Andrew Steptoe (AS), papers held by Joe Schulman (JS), and papers among the possessions of the late Edwards and his late wife, Ruth Fowler Edwards, which have been kindly made available to us by their family (RGE). In-text references are indicated by the archive initials plus a reference number and date, and the details for each reference are recorded in the reference list. In this paper, we use data from the back pages of notebooks L1–4, 6 and 7, which record, in Purdy's hand, records of dates of travel to and from Oldham by herself and Edwards, plus records of accommodation used and meals taken. These incomplete data formed the basis for expenses claimed from Mr Holmes of the University of Cambridge Financial Board, some of which are recorded and priced (see [Johnson and Elder, 2015b](#)). The form taken by these records varies with time (for details see [Elder and Johnson, 2015a](#)), but include mostly travel, meal and accommodation expenses of Edwards and Purdy, although two additional sets of initials appear in the expenses records from January to June 1974, namely JS and IF. JS is identifiable elsewhere in the notes as Joe and IF as Ian. We have identified these two as Joe Schulman (confirmed by him) and Ian Fergusson: a letter from the former dated 8 July reads as though he only recently left the UK to return to the USA ([RGE1, 1974](#)), and the latter was known to be trying IVF at Queen Charlotte's and Chelsea Hospitals in London both before ([RGE2, 1973](#)) and after (JW, pp.14 and 40) this 6-month period at the beginning of 1974 (see also [Yovich, 2011, p.34](#)). In addition, scientific papers and the volume *A Matter of Life* ([Edwards and Steptoe, 1980](#)) have been consulted, as described in [Elder and Johnson \(2015a\)](#).

Reference to previously published interview transcripts is made by use of initials: GM (Grace MacDonald; [Elder and Johnson, 2015b](#), Suppl. Material 1), JW (John Webster), NF (Noni Fallows) or SC (Sandra Corbett – all in Suppl. Material 1 and 2, [Johnson and Elder, 2015a](#)). Each of these interviewees has consented to the use in this paper of all quotations by them. In addition, we include some quotes (with permission) from email correspondence with Alan Dexter (Managing Director at Bourn Hall from 1980 to 1983) and Dr Joe Schulman (former clinical and laboratory research colleague of Edwards, Steptoe and Purdy). Finally, we have interviewed Rosemary Carter, a long-standing friend of Jean Purdy, and Barbara Rankin (former secretary to Edwards from 1969 to 1987), and references to the content of those interviews are used throughout.

Results and discussion

Recording of the data

The loose sheets of notes and patient clinical/laparoscopy records from 1969 to March 1977 are records of follicle aspirations transcribed during the procedure, and are therefore

written by someone who was not in sterile attire for the operation, possibly the anaesthetist (JW, personal communication). The majority of the earlier records (1969–1970) have additional notes added by Jean Purdy in red ink, and a few (<10%) have additional notes added by Patrick Steptoe. A collection of 'scraps' of paper in Edwards' hand details follicle aspirations for a few cases in September 1969, which appear to constitute material written 'on the run'. All of this material was then written up in the 21 notebooks as described in [Elder and Johnson \(2015a-c\)](#). Most (circa 75%) of this writing-up was in Purdy's hand, the remainder being transcribed by Edwards himself, aside from one case written up in another hand, on 9 June 1974, now confirmed as being (mostly) that of 'Joe S'. Thus, Purdy played the major role in systematizing the data, which was used both for analysis and for publication of results.

Organizational aspects of the work

[Table 1](#) shows the numbers of laparoscopic egg collection cycles initiated (column 3) and completed (column 4) by year. Initial peak years are 1969/70, dipping between 1971 and 1975, before rising to peak again in 1978. A finer-grained display of these data is given in [Figure 1](#), which indicates that cycles varied not only by year but also by month within each year, ranging between 0 and 18 per month.

Archival research offers explanations for some of this variation. Thus, interruptions to the work resulted from the fact that Steptoe had two hip replacements over this period (personal communication, Andrew Steptoe, who recalls 1972/73 and around 1976). This issue was first raised early in 1972 ([Edwards and Steptoe, 1980, p.119](#)) and it is possible that the first operation/recovery occurred between August and December 1972 (orange background in [Figure 1](#)), when only three laparoscopic oocyte retrieval (LOR) procedures were recorded. Steptoe's other hip became an issue in 1975 ([Edwards and Steptoe, 1980, p.124](#)), the operation occurring on the

Table 1 Summary of procedures carried out by year.

Year	Total procedures listed (n)	LOR that proceeded to attempted egg collection (n)	LOR in which egg collection was attempted and an outcome recorded (n)
1969	60	58	58
1970	64	62	59
1971	46	41	40
1972	41	40	40
1973	45	38	26
1974	43	35	35
1975	40	34	34
1976	58	51	48
1977	43	33	33
	[40SC; 3NC]	[30SC; 3NC]	[30SC; 3NC]
1978	80	65	63
	[2SC; 78NC]	[All NC]	[All NC]
Total	520	457	436

LOR = laparoscopic egg retrieval; NC = natural cycle; SC = stimulated cycle.

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