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SYMPOSIUM: THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST IVF BIRTHS

The Oldham Notebooks: an analysis of the development of IVF 1969-1978. VI. Sources of support and patterns of expenditure


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Abstract Three major sources of financial support for the research undertaken by Edwards, Steptoe and Purdy between 1969 and 1978 are identified: the Ford Foundation, Oldham and District General Hospital (ODGH) Management Committee, and Miss Lillian Lincoln Howell via the American Friends of Cambridge University. Significant possible financial support from the World Health Organization was also identified. In addition, evidence of support in kind from GD Searle and Co. plus staff at ODGH was found. Expenditure on salaries of staff at Oldham was negligible, as most volunteered their time outside of their official paid duties. Work in Cambridge was evidently funded largely from Ford Foundation grants, as was Edwards' salary and probably that of Purdy. Clinical costs seem to have been largely borne by ODGH. The funds from Lillian Lincoln Howell supported travel and accommodation costs plus office costs. Overall, Edwards, Steptoe and Purdy achieved reasonable support for the programme of research, despite the initial rejection of funding by the Medical Research Council. However, this was at the expense of considerable inconvenience to Purdy and Edwards, and depended upon the good will of staff led by Muriel Harris in Oldham, who donated their time and expertise. As a result of our research, we conclude that, to Edwards, Steptoe and Purdy, should be added the names of two other hitherto neglected people who were essential to the success of this pioneering research: namely Muriel Harris and Lillian Lincoln Howell. 

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Introduction

The birth of Louise Brown represented the outcome of nearly 10 years of work by Robert Edwards, Jean Purdy and Patrick Steptoe in Oldham and Cambridge (Elder and Johnson, 2015a,b,c; Johnson and Elder, 2015a,b). This work was attacked in the media (NF, Suppl. Material 1, pp. 6–7 in Johnson and Elder, 2015a) and by many eminent scientists and doctors (Perrutz in Anon, 1971a,b; Watson in Anon, 1971c; Short in Johnson et al., 2010, p.2165–6) and indeed was considered to be so controversial medically, socially and ethically as to be denied funding by the Medical Research Council (MRC) of the UK for 10 years from 1972 (Johnson et al., 2010). In this paper, we examine the cost of this research and describe our investigations into the funding sources that covered these costs.

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 Cambridge University (CUA) and at the National Archive (NA) plus 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 the details for each reference are recorded in the reference list. 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).

We have also drawn on interviews with Grace McDonald (GM; for transcript see Suppl. Material 1 in Elder and Johnson, 2015b), John Webster [JW] and Noni Fallows [NF], and Sandra Corbett [SC] (transcripts of these interviews are provided as Supplementary Materials 1 and 2 in Johnson and Elder, 2015a). In addition, we have used excerpts with permission from email exchanges with Virginia Papaioannou, Carol Readhead and Caroline Blackwell.

For comparison of monetary values of historic sums with today's values, the web site <http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/bills/article-1633409/Historic-inflation-calculator-value-money-changed-1900.html> was consulted. Where comparisons are made over a period of 3–5 years, the average equivalent is given; for longer periods the start and finish range is given. For period dollar/pound conversions, <http://www.measuringworth.com/> was used.

Results and discussion

After first exploring the sources of funding that supported the research, we then consider how this income was spent.

Funding

Unsuccessful applications for funding

We already know that the MRC refused funding in 1971 (Johnson et al., 2010), but papers in the Edwards archive

add some information to that published earlier (Suppl. Material 1). In addition to the MRC's refusal, letters to Dr Hannington of the the Wellcome Trust dated 27 October and 10 December 1970 also drew a blank and "no reasons were given" (RGE4, 1970).

Minor funding sources

Patients did not pay for treatment at Oldham, only for their transport to and from Oldham and any accommodation costs when not in the clinic (GM, p.19). However, some patients wished to contribute financial support for the work and this was paid into the Edwards and Steptoe Research Trust Fund, which was set up and registered as a charity in 1974 for this purpose. Edwards and Steptoe also donated fees earned from lectures etc. into this trust. The fund may have contributed some modest funds up to 1978, but the accounts are only available from 1985 (RGE5, 1974). Examination of the *Cambridge University Reporter* for the expenditure records listed under Physiology on external grants for the period 1961 to 1974 (after which such records no longer appear) reveals the presence of reproductive grants from various sources to the department. Although the names of the grant holders are not specified, it is possible for most grants to find this information from other sources (see names in Suppl. Material 2). Those to Edwards included three grants from the Wellcome Trust. Grant number 1234, (1970/1971 – 1973/1974), totalled £2,518 (= £31,378 at current values) supported his American graduate student, CWS Howe, who was working on the immunology of pregnancy (CUA1, 1972). A second grant, number 1563 (1972/73 – 1973/74) totalled £2827 (= £34,367 at current values) is likely to have been for Edwards, possibly jointly with RL Gardner, as VE Papaioannou is recorded as being paid from it (CUA1, 1972). The third grant, number 1509 (1972/73 – 1974/75) totalling £33,093 (= £354,808 at current values), employed C Readhead, then working on animal follicle development under Edwards (CUA1, 1972). None of these grants involved the human work, as likewise two other grants identified as being to H Pratt and to D Whittingham (CUA1, 1972 and Suppl. Material 2). Examination of the acknowledgements pages for papers published during and shortly after 1974 reveals one from 1976 that thanks the MRC (Faddy et al., 1976), probably referring to one of the two MRC project grants awarded to Edwards in the 1970s, entitled 'The growth and differentiation of Graafian follicles in the ovary (rodents)' (1975), although a request 'to extend the study to human follicles was declined' (the second being that awarded in 1976 to 'Dr Edwards and [Azim] Surani for work on the cellular and molecular aspects of blastocyst–uterine interactions at implantation [rodents]'; NA1, 1978). The only grant listed that was likely to have been for Edwards and possibly involving human work, is from the World Health Organization (WHO), grant number 63 (1969/70-1972/73) totalling £15,018 (= £200,268 at current values) for 'Studies on the genetics and embryology of early mammalian and human development'. However, the WHO is not thanked in any of Edwards' papers, and we have not been able to find other references to it, so its possible use in the IVF work remains conjectural. Beyond these funding sources, only perhaps the last of which might have directly funded the human work, three major sources of support for that work have been identified.

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