

Why are egg donors paid less than sperm donors?

OPINIONS

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Donating eggs takes longer, and is more onerous, than donating sperm. Nevertheless, sperm donors are generally paid more than some egg donors. Is the debate about payment for egg donation influenced by gender stereotypes?

After many years of political debate, egg donations became a reality in Norway in 2021. During the consultation process to develop guidelines for egg donation and decide the rate of pay for egg donors, the government authorities and the various consultee bodies were all in agreement that egg donation must be motivated by altruism (1). In the consultation documents, an altruistic donation was defined as a donation made for reasons other than financial reward (1).

Different debates

There has never been a similar debate about motivation and altruism in respect of sperm donation (2). The rate of pay for sperm donation is currently set at 0.7 % of 1 G (Basic Amount in the National Insurance Scheme), which currently equals NOK 830, and it is expected that sperm donors will donate sperm between 10 and 15 times (3, p. 36). Because the rate of pay for egg donation was eventually set at 5 % of 1 G (currently NOK 5 931), this means that egg donors receive a smaller amount than what sperm donors can expect to receive in total.

Admittedly, egg donors can donate eggs on up to three occasions but they will then have to go through three donation cycles, each of which is estimated to take 37.5 hours (3, p. 34). Both egg and sperm donors have their travel expenses reimbursed on top of the payment they receive for the donation.

«Because sperm donation is less time-consuming and less onerous than egg donation, it appears misjudged that sperm donors are paid more than egg donors»

The Norwegian Parliament requested that the Government find a level of compensation that would reflect the time spent and the level of inconvenience incurred from donating egg and sperm cells (3, p. 8). Because sperm donation is less time-consuming and less onerous than egg donation, it appears misjudged that sperm donors are paid more than egg donors. Even after a single donation cycle, egg donors should at least receive an amount which is equal to that received by sperm donors. The Norwegian Directorate of Health suggested 10 % of 1 G (currently NOK 11 862) after having estimated the time spent and assessed the inconvenience of donating eggs (3, pp. 33–35). However, the Ministry of Health and Care Services chose the lowest option put forward (5 % of 1 G), because they were worried that the monetary reward would become a motivation for donating eggs (1).

In March 2021, the Norwegian Biotechnology Advisory Board organised a meeting to discuss the payment of financial compensation to egg and sperm donors. During the meeting, it was highlighted that the practice of paying sperm donors had never been raised as a problem, 'neither in the past nor in the present'. In that context the Medical Ethics Council conceded that 'we later came to query our own reasoning as set out in the consultation response' (4, 34:20–35:42). This statement was based on the fact that even though the Council had raised no objection to increasing the rate of pay for sperm donation, they feared that any payment beyond compensation for expenses incurred and loss of income might cause women in financial need to donate eggs primarily motivated by the pay (1).

«The unequal treatment of egg and sperm donations may just as well be rooted in deep-seated and persistent cultural perceptions about what it means to be male and female»

The potential impact of gender stereotypes

The self-scrutiny undertaken by the Medical Ethics Council may well be touching on a general aspect of the debate. For what is the reason that payment for sperm donation has never been raised as an issue? Perhaps some of the explanation is that the amount payable *per donation* appears to be rather low in the case of sperm donation and is therefore less likely to represent a financial

motivation for donating sperm. On the other hand, the unequal treatment of egg and sperm donations may just as well be rooted in deep-seated and persistent cultural perceptions about what it means to be male and female.

In the history of ideas, the stereotypical perception of women as passive and malleable, and driven by emotions rather than reason, is deeply entrenched (5). In a different debate, which also focuses on reproduction, the argument that women are 'mentally unstable' has historically been used to restrict their access to abortion and raised concerns that 'easier access to abortion may make women more vulnerable, more at risk of falling victim to the insistence of frivolous womanisers' (6, pp. 155 and 215). If we look to the etymology of the word *motivation*, we find that it comes from the Latin *move*, which means *to move* (7). Undesirable motives and sources of influence, such as easy money from egg and sperm cell donation, will clearly move the passive, unstable and emotionally driven more easily than those who are active, stable and driven by reason.

In contrast to the stereotypical female, we find the stereotypical male: active, driven by reason and stable (5), and supposedly more resistant to being led astray by financial reward. Consequently, financial motivation may appear more threatening and even more scary when the actors are women.

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