

CMC/JBV/d

15 July 1993

The Hon Tom Sackville MP
Parliamentary Under-secretary of State
Department of Health
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London
SW1

Dear Minister,

Sex Selection

You may recall that you wrote to me in January asking for the advice of the Authority on the matter of sex selection. At that time, the Authority was about to publish a public consultation document seeking views on the use of assisted conception techniques to select the sex of children for medical or social reasons. The period of consultation has now ended and we have reviewed the responses received. The Authority has reached a view on the issues and I now write to advise you of our conclusions.

Sex Selection for medical reasons

The Authority agrees in principle to the use of sex selection techniques in cases where a woman risks having a child with a life-threatening sex-linked disease. As you know, the secondary method of *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF) is already licensed for this purpose by this Authority. However, the data currently available on the success of primary techniques like sperm sorting do not support the use of these methods for such medical reasons at this time.

Sex selection for social reasons

A range of arguments for and against the use of assisted conception techniques to select the sex of children for social reasons was set out in our public consultation document. The Authority, on balance, is persuaded by the arguments set out in the document against the use of sex selection for social reasons. Accordingly, I will be writing to those centres which are licensed under the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Act advising them not to take part in sex selection techniques for social reasons. This advice will later be incorporated into the Authority's Code of Practice.

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The public consultation

While the public response to the consultation document was limited, the overall view of those who responded was strongly against the use of sex selection for social reasons. Of those respondents who discussed the issues in general terms, over two-thirds (67%) were opposed to sex selection for social reasons. Of those who distinguished between methods, ninety-three per cent were against the use of secondary sex selection techniques (IVF) for social reasons, and about four out of five were against the use of primary techniques like sperm-sorting for social reasons. The main points raised against sex selection are set out below.

The concern most often expressed was about reinforcing sexual stereotypes to the disadvantage of women. Respondents with this view believed that sex selection would lead to a widespread preference for male children. Fears were also expressed about the start of a "slippery slope" towards selecting the "perfect child". These anxieties were echoed in concerns about children becoming "consumer goods". A number of respondents were worried about the effect on the family involved in sex selection of a child. If sex selection were unsuccessful, the parents might react badly. If it were successful, existing siblings might be psychologically affected as the child of the chosen sex might be favoured at their expense.

Some respondents were further disturbed about the effect of sex selection on certain ethnic communities, believing that it would result in an imbalance in those communities in favour of boys. Others felt that sex selection for social reasons was not a proper use of medical resources, skills and time. A few respondents expressed concern about upsetting the balance of the sexes in the general population and a very small number considered that sex selection was unethical because the sex of a child is "God-given".

Accordingly, while the arguments on this issue are complex, the view of the Authority on sex selection for social reasons is strongly supported by the public who responded to our consultation exercise. I propose to announce our decision by making this letter public at a press conference on 20 July when we will launch this year's Annual Report.

This may be an issue which we shall need to return to in the future. Technological advances are constantly being made. We shall, therefore, be keeping the matter under review in the light of any new information or changes in public opinion.

Yours sincerely,

Carole Caplan