

Is Erasing Menopause In Our Near Future? Is It A Desirable Feminist Project?



In this post, Jill Drouillard discusses recent scientific research on women and menopause. She asks the question whether it is desirable to erase menopause if we had the technology to do so and, furthermore, what that would mean for women and women's bodies.

Recent scientific publications increasingly contest the former belief that women's biological clock will, as a matter of course, run out of time. Women have long accepted that after a certain age, they will go through "changes" whereby they will no longer be able to reproduce. Should women accept such "changes" as part of the normal ebb and flow of life, or should women turn to new advances in technology in the hope of controlling menopausal conditions once thought inevitable? Is delaying the effects of menopause desirable to a new generation of women who continue to put motherhood on hold in pursuit of career advancement or financial stability? Should women be weary of new medical advances that require extensive and invasive experimental research on women's bodies? One thing is sure – women must start seriously considering these questions as three recent medical breakthroughs suggest menopausal reversal is becoming more of a reality.

On July 4th 2012, medical correspondent Stephen Adams published an article in the *Telegraph* giving women hope that they may soon have the freedom to reset their biological clock in rhythm with their lifestyle choices. The title of the article "**Women could delay the menopause indefinitely with ovary transplant**" speaks volumes to the increasing number of women who choose to hold off on having children due to modern changes in their socio-economic conditions. Adams quotes Dr. Sherman J. Silber, an American surgeon and fertility expert, who states "All modern women are concerned about what is commonly referred to as their 'biological clock' as they worry about the chances of conceiving by the time they have established their career and/or their marriage and their financial stability." The possibility of ovarian transplants then offers a response to this mounting anxiety that time will run out and leave women involuntarily infertile.

The medical procedure involves the removal and cryopreservation of ovarian tissue that can be transplanted back into the female body later in life when she is ready to conceive. The article reports that 20 successful births have resulted from these transplants. Should we anticipate similar births in the near future? Dr. Silber notes "A woman born today has a 50 percent chance of living to 100. That means they are going to be spending half of their lives post-menopause." Is it fair that women should be forced to undergo menopause whilst men are able to procreate well into their 80s (sometimes longer!)? Would the delaying of menopause provide women with the reproductive freedom necessary to living more fulfilling lives?

"What about women who are born without wombs?" Or, "what about those whose wombs were damaged due to premature cancer or other illnesses?" An ovarian transplant cannot be successful without a viable womb. One week after the publication of the article on ovarian transplants, the *Telegraph* continues to deliver groundbreaking news, as Medical Editor Rebecca Smith reports "**Womb transplants could be a reality in Britain within two years.**" The article states that in addition to helping the 14,000 women in Britain who were born without a womb or who suffered early hysterectomies, the possibility of a womb transplant offers women the opportunity to have a biologically related child as an ethical alternative to the much-contested practice of surrogacy. Gynaecological surgeon Richard Smith is now launching a charity, Uterine Transplantation UK, to raise £500,000 necessary to carry out the remaining experiments in animals and the first five operations in humans. If funding is accumulated and the sources are correct, we are two years away from a medical breakthrough in reproductive medicine.



Another breakthrough is likely to occur in the coming months, writes Stephen Conner in “[Rewriting Rules of Human Reproduction](#)”, appearing in the *Economic Times*. Conner reports that the first human egg cells grown from stem cells could be fertilized later this year. It all started when Professor Jonathan Tilly of Harvard debunked the longstanding belief that women are born with a certain bank of eggs to be deposited before entering menopause. In 2004, he conducted studies on ovaries in mice, showing that certain active stem cells have the potential to regenerate eggs throughout one’s lifespan. Experiments need only be extended to human ovaries, which are fast approaching. Conner says, “Scientists are about to request a licence from the UK fertility watchdog to fertilise the eggs as part of tests to generate an unlimited supply of human eggs – a breakthrough that could help infertile women to have babies as well as making women as fertile in later life as men.” The article refers to the eradication of menopause as the “elixir of youth.” We women must ask ourselves: Will we drink from the fountain?

Is this what Cranach had in mind when he painted his famous “Fountain of Youth?” The fact that only women appear in his tableau is not a detail to be neglected, nor is the fact that only women are subject to menopause (despite recent talk of “manopause” or “andropause,” men’s ability to procreate never really comes to an abrupt pause or stop). Would women’s ability to procreate as late in life as men create an equal playing field when it comes to the politics of reproduction? Women must choose between having children and having a career in a way that is psychologically unbeknownst to men. A man doesn’t hear the progressively more insistent ticking of an inner clock as he enters into his thirties. Different avenues of society have begun to open their doors to women, as they may now attend university, enter into politics, choose once closed-off career paths etc. However, the anxiety remains that women must choose these to the detriment of maternity. Of course, women can and do partake in the juggling act of raising kids and working. But, wouldn’t it be easier if that tick tock could be delayed just a little bit longer?

In theory, I think feminists would agree that reproductive choice is a positive thing. I also think that if being able to change the hands of time allowed women more time to pursue goals such as advancement in the workplace then at least a stalling (if not a full-on erasure) of menopause is a desirable feminist project – not to mention the physical health benefits of thwarting oestrogen depletion, including banishing hot flashes and lowering chances of osteoporosis.

Then again, women have not had it easy with a medical history that teems with abuse on women’s bodies, including—but not limited to—faulty trials, forced sterilizations, racist eugenics, invasive procedures, inadequate informed consent, etc. and recent news coverage about the risks involved (several of which may remain unknown to us) with recent reproductive technology practices such as egg donation and *in vitro* fertilization, may cause us to think again, not to mention medicine’s increasingly complex relationship with capitalism (It may be interesting to look at this [article](#) that discusses how fertility doctors may be offered kickbacks). Whatever our position may be on the matter, it’s important to start forming one, because the possibility of erasing menopause is in our near future.

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