

Science & Society

## The biological clock on ice

**N**ature isn't fair. While men can father children in their golden years, the female biological clock is far less forgiving: The quality and quantity of a woman's eggs decline in her late 20s and fall off rapidly after age 35. By 40, her odds of conceiving are only about 5 percent per month.

For a generation of women who often put off motherhood to focus on careers, that reality is hard to take. So there is excitement about the new technology of egg freezing, which may someday put the biological clock on hold. With this procedure, a woman takes drugs to stimulate her ovaries. The resulting eggs are extracted and either frozen slowly with liquid nitrogen or "vitrified," a newer, superfast cooling process. They can be stored indefinitely, then thawed, fertilized, and implanted when the woman is ready to conceive. In theory, egg freezing lets women avoid the mad scramble for a mate. "It puts us on equal footing with men in a way that we've never been before," says Cassandra McCarthy, a 34-year-old actress who will soon undergo the procedure.

**New focus.** Cancer patients have had access to egg freezing for several years. But the technology is increasingly being offered to healthy women like McCarthy, the demographic being targeted by a start-up company called Extend Fertility.

Scientists call the technology promising, but many are wary of its widespread use. "It's not ready for prime time," says Owen Davis, president of the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology and the associate director of IVF at Cornell University's Center for Reproductive Medicine and Infertility. Davis says there is still scant published data on the procedure, and there is also a theoretical risk that freezing could damage an egg's chromosomes.

Including drugs and storage, the procedure runs from \$10,000 to \$15,000 for the first attempt. (Subsequent attempts are less expensive.) It isn't for everyone; the ideal client is 35 or younger, says Extend Fertility's founder, Christy Jones, a 34-year-old Harvard Business School graduate who had her eggs frozen. The odds of actually conceiving are generally from 20 to 30 percent, but such factors as age and number of eggs stored influence success rates. That's better than waiting until 40, to be sure, but no guarantee. *-Katherine Hobson*