Contraception is as important as fertility preservation in young women with cancer

As part of the Lancet fertility preservation Series, Michel De Vos and colleagues (Oct 4, p 1302)1 presented a concise overview of fertility preservation methods for women with cancer. Here, we aim to emphasise that contraception counselling is just as important.

Of the patients registered in our Cancer in Pregnancy database, 29 (3%) became pregnant during cancer staging or treatment. Median age was 34 years (range 16–48). Median gestational age was 6 weeks (3–26) at discovery of pregnancy. Pregnancy was identified during staging (n=3, 10%), before start of treatment (n=8, 28%), during treatment (n=17) [four at hormone treatment, three at radiotherapy, four at surgery, four at chemotherapy, and two at immunotherapy], 59%, and at an unknown stage (n=1, 3%).

Pregnancy outcome was termination of pregnancy (n=9, 31%), spontaneous abortion (n=2, 7%), extraterine pregnancy (n=1, 3%), and livebirth (n=17, 59%). At pregnancy diagnosis, contraception had been absent (n=13, 45%), had failed (n=7, 24%) [three using condoms, two using hormonal contraception, one using ovarian ablation with goserelin, and one using radiosterilisation], or was unknown (n=9, 31%).

Our data probably under-represent actual incidence of women who become pregnant during cancer treatment because the database is focused on cancer diagnosis during pregnancy.2 Although some cancer treatment can be given during pregnancy, it should be avoided whenever possible. Risk of congenital malformation is high during the first trimester, especially after chemotherapy and tamoxifen exposure.3 Termination of pregnancy causes major psychological distress, sadness, and grieving. These issues can easily be avoided by one of many contraceptive methods, such as a copper intrauterine device.4 We propose that all young women diagnosed with cancer should have an appointment with a gynaecologist to discuss both fertility preservation and contraception before start of treatment.

We declare no competing interests.

1 Sileny N Han, †Sarah Van Peer, Pedro Peccatori, Mina Mhallem Gziri, †Frédéric Amant, on behalf of the International Network on Cancer, Infertility and Pregnancy frederic.amant@uzeleuven.be

*Dominic Stoop, Sherman Silber, Ana Cobo dominicstoop@gmail.com

UZ Brussel of the Dutch Speaking Free University of Brussels, Centre for Reproductive Medicine, Brussels 1090, Belgium


