

What happened to the 71ers?

By Ruth Pollard

The “in control” generation is about to lose it.

As the children of 1971—Australia’s largest ever year for births—march toward their 40s, confident in their own health and the ability of technology to deal with any medical problems they experience, fertility experts warn they are in for a rude shock.

It is feared the new boomers will leave their own baby-making so late that not even science will be able to provide Australia with another boom generation.

The national birth rate is in continual decline—the only thing going up is the number of women over the age of 35 having babies. It is no coincidence, and it is a trend unlikely to be reversed.

“The chance of a spontaneous pregnancy in your late 30s is half what it was in your late 20s,” says Howard Smith, clinical director of the Westmead Fertility Centre at Westmead Hospital.

“These people will have lost the most fertile years of their lives. Standard IVF treatment does not overcome the effect of age. The eggs are fewer and the ones that are left are harder to fertilise—that is the thing most people don’t appreciate,” Dr Smith says.

According to the Bureau of Statistics, Australia’s fertility rate declined steadily during the 1990s by about 0.02 children per woman per year. In 2000 to 2001, it reached a post-war low of 1.73 children per woman—a five percent fall over 15 years.

“They feel as though they are immortal, so why would they worry about having kids?” says Stephen Steigrad, of the Royal Hospital for Women’s Department of Reproductive Medicine at Randwick.

“They are all out there getting themselves organised with the basics: two Beamers [BMW] in the garage, every white good in creation, plasma-screen TV. They are saying: ‘We can’t possibly have a child yet.’”

The 71ers are probably among our healthiest generation, Dr. Steigrad says—at no other time have fewer people in their early 30s been seriously ill or hospitalised.

“They have fought their way into some sort of career path...and they may not have made a commitment to a partner until later in life,” he says.

“Infertility will probably be the first major career disaster they have ever had. And this group aren’t used to failing. What’s more, it is their bodies that have failed and they can’t fix it.”

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These are the people who, at the tender age of 16, first watched a group of men, women and children skittled by the Grim Reaper in a ghostly bowling alley, as a voice-over delivered a doomsday warning about HIV transmission. So how are they at sex and relationships?

Anne Hollonds, chief executive officer of Relationships Australia NSW, says 71ers are less likely to be married, more likely to be in de facto relationships, and mostly childless.

“Remember these are the kids of the generation who divorced in very high numbers after divorce laws were changed in 1975,” Hollonds says. “They are not

experienced an increase in inquiries from people in the 32-year-old age group wanting to do pre-marriage seminars and courses. “It is a sign that these younger people are wanting to enhance their chances of relationship success—maybe they will be a generation who don’t let their relationships die of neglect.”

Sex is important to them, Hollonds says, and is seen as an indicator of the health or success of the relationship.

Source: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 05 Feb 2003, <<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/02/04/1044318608263.html>>