

**IVF and Assisted Reproduction:  
Australia and the Global Experience  
Workshop Report for the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia**

*Convenors: Professor Sarah Ferber (University of Wollongong), Professor Vera Mackie (University of Wollongong), Dr Nicola Marks (University of Wollongong), with Dr Robyn Morris (University of Wollongong).*

The 40th anniversary of the birth of the first babies conceived through in vitro fertilisation (IVF) will take place in 2018. The rise in international surrogacy, fertility travel and advances in freezing technology are aspects of assisted reproduction that would not have been imaginable in 1978 when the first two 'IVF babies' were born in the UK and India. A timely workshop titled "IVF and Assisted Reproduction: Australia and the Global Experience" was held in association with the Australian Research Council-funded research project: IVF and Assisted Reproduction: The Global Experience (DP 150101081), at the University of Wollongong (UOW) on February 9–10, 2017.

The workshop was convened by Professor Sarah Ferber, Professor Vera Mackie and Dr Nicola Marks with the assistance of Dr Robyn Morris. and supported by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia Workshop Program and the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts at the University of Wollongong (UOW).

The two day workshop at UOW successfully brought together leading social scientists, historians, literary scholars, lawyers, cultural and medical anthropologists and psychotherapists to survey the global history, present situation and future prospects of IVF and assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) in their cultural and social context. Participants ranged from senior scholars to PhD students. Their case studies focused on Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, France and the French Pacific, South East Asia and East Asia, the United States and diasporic communities.

Discussion at the workshop placed IVF and associated forms of assisted reproduction in their changing historical and contemporary contexts, in local sites which are embedded in global and transnational processes and in specific local cultural contexts. As individual presentations revealed, rarely has a medical technology presented such ambiguities as IVF.

The workshop provided a collegial platform from which to map the global dimensions of the history of IVF and ARTs. Its aims were to:

- reflect on the four decades of history of IVF and assisted reproduction;
- situate IVF and assisted reproduction in their cultural and social context;
- encourage dialogue between social scientists, lawyers and medical practitioners;
- consider the current state of the regulation of IVF and assisted reproduction in Australia;
- place Australian policies in a comparative regional and global context; and
- consider future policy directions.

A common theme arising from papers was that ARTs, similar to other technologies, are historically and culturally shaped. Individual presentations highlighted that IVF has been supplemented by other technologies and practices, such as donor insemination, the provision of third party ova, the freezing of gametes and embryos, and the creation of babies with three genetic parents. Once conception and gestation had been separated, it became possible to engage in surrogacy or gestational surrogacy. Commissioning parents now travel to such places as India, Thailand or the USA to engage in transnational surrogacy arrangements. Although commercial surrogacy is prohibited in Australia, recent media controversies have demonstrated that Australians do travel overseas to engage in transnational surrogacy agreements. A number of presentations highlighted the different attitudes to policy and regulatory responses in different countries. Some countries regulate surrogacy; some prohibit it; while in some places there is a lack of regulation. In some countries there is legal regulation, while in others there is self-regulation by the medical profession.

Furthermore, the workshop demonstrated that the ways in which IVF and ARTs are deployed in particular contexts or geographical locations are not always predictable. Discussion ensued on whether ARTs can bolster conventional family structures or challenge these through facilitating single, gay, lesbian and transgender parenthood. ARTs also enable complex combinations of genetic, gestational and social parenting. ARTs and the possibility of freezing reproductive materials also open up complex (and not always desired) options for fertility preservation for transgender people.

Biomedical technologies such as genetic testing and assisted reproduction challenge culturally accepted definitions of families, including legal definitions of family and family life.

Transforming the nature of law around parentage and legal personhood, these developments carry significant implications for the notion of 'rights' in the pursuit of social and legal justice.

One pertinent issue is the potential for the transnational regulation of surrogacy. The gaps between regulatory regimes in different jurisdictions are one of the reasons for reproductive

travel. Scandals involving cross-border surrogacy arrangements – such as the baby Manji case in India or the Baby Gammy case in Thailand – have prompted some to call for a global regulation of surrogacy. The workshop highlighted how the social sciences can contribute to an examination of how rights emerge at the intersection of law and biology in a context of global reproduction.

While routine IVF became accepted in many societies as a way to help heterosexual couples have a family, its more recent use to create less traditional families became an issue of sustained discussion during the two days of the workshop. This important dialogue indicates how important the social sciences are to charting this constantly evolving history of medical technologies. IVF and ARTs have indeed forced a reimagining of traditional notions of family, therefore bringing new social challenges to understandings of gender relations.

The complexities and ambiguities surrounding IVF discourse were a focus of the highly successful public Roundtable at the close of the first day, titled, “IVF: The Global Experience”. The presentations were by leading international researchers in the field of IVF including Professor Sarah Franklin (University of Cambridge), Professor Marcia Inhorn (Yale University), and Dr Nicola Marks (University of Wollongong). The roundtable was chaired by Professor Sarah Ferber, (University of Wollongong).

Presentations during the two days also demonstrated how IVF and ARTs can bring happiness to many people, while at the same time opening up troubling potentialities. This further indicates the profound effects of IVF and ARTs on individuals, families, and social groups. Additionally, there was analysis of how cultural understandings and different genres can communicate about assisted reproduction in, for example, India, Japan, New Caledonia and New Zealand. Different genres of texts – such as scientific articles, laws, medical regulations, popular media and memoirs, can construct particular ways of making families as acceptable or transgressive.

In this sense, social science research is central to ongoing debate about the global dimensions of IVF and ARTs. The contemporaneity of this issue, its importance to legal and political responses, and public debate will be reflected in workshop’s outcome, an edited collection of papers presented by the invited speakers and edited by the workshop convenors. This collection, *The Body and the Globe: From IVF to the Global Reproductive Industry*, is contracted to Lexington

Books. Contributors to the collection will analyse the ever-widening gaps between medical practice, legal regulations and popular understandings of IVF and ARTs.

For more information, see [uowblogs.com/ivfglobalexperience](http://uowblogs.com/ivfglobalexperience) and <http://stand.uow.edu.au/the-business-of-designer-babies/>.