

More women are choosing to solo parent, and here's why

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Charlotte Storey with daughters Ava, 3, and Rose, 5. "I just wake up in the morning and I still can't believe I've got two beautiful girls," she says.

JAMES BRICKWOOD

A record number of single women are using IVF as Australia's health ministers prepare to consider a regulatory overhaul of the fertility sector after a series of disastrous errors.

The latest official analysis of every IVF cycle across Australia and New Zealand also revealed the chances of having a baby may depend on the fertility clinic performing the treatment, with two clinics reporting success rates of just 5 per cent. The names of the clinics have not been made public.

Single women and same-sex female couples accounted for one in five in vitro fertilisation (IVF) cycles in Australia in 2023, highlighting the increasing diversity of IVF parents, the latest data from the Australian and New Zealand Assisted Reproduction Database (ANZARD) shows.

"Most people would picture heterosexual couples when they think about who is using IVF, but it's increasingly being used to create modern, non-traditional families," said Professor Georgina Chambers, director of the National Perinatal Epidemiology and Statistics Unit at UNSW and lead author of the report.

Of the more than 109,000 cycles performed, 14.6 per cent involved single women and 4.4 per cent same-sex female couples.

Charlotte Storey, from Sydney's north shore, was in her late 30s when she decided to use IVF in the hope of starting a family.

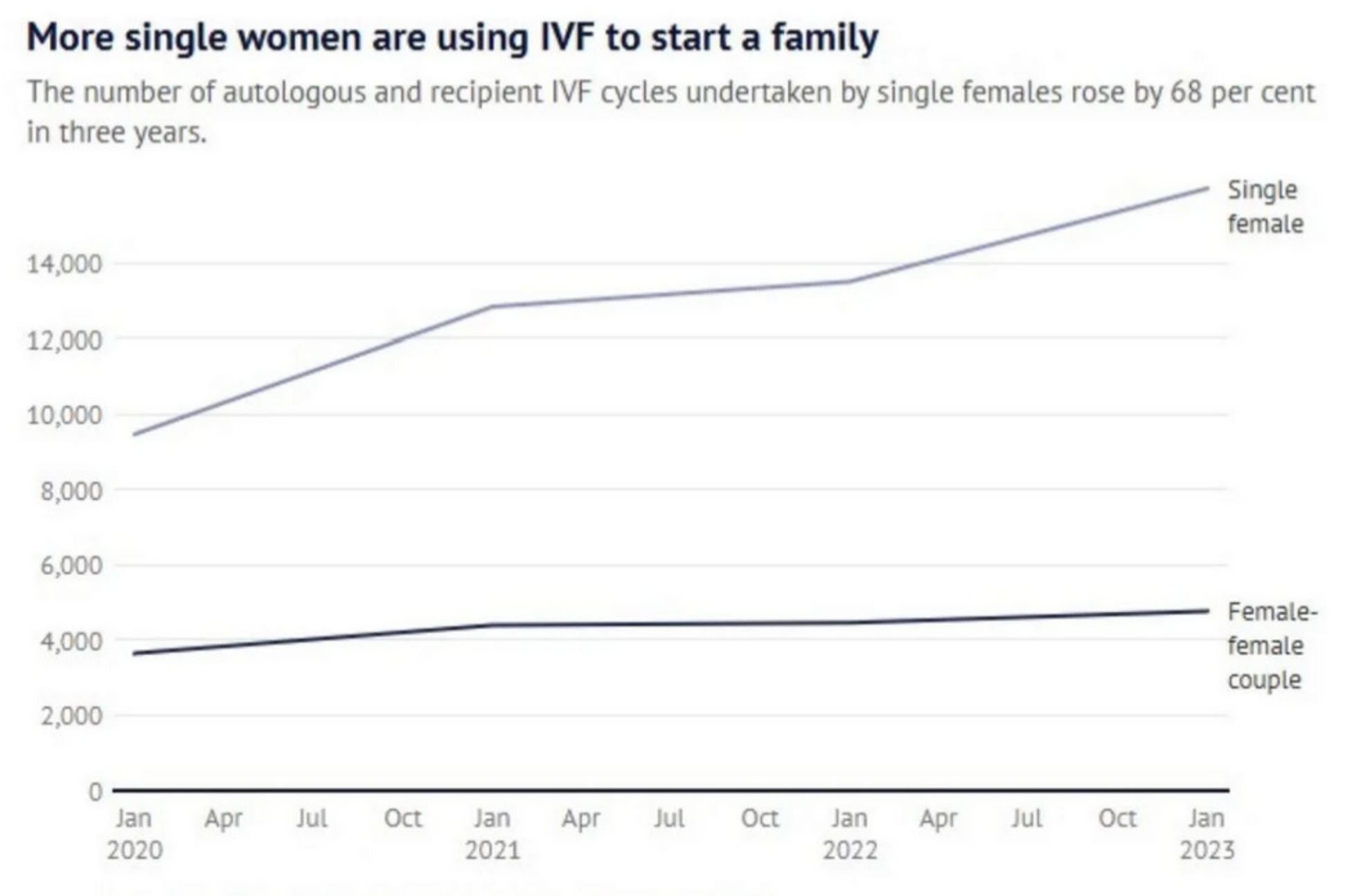
"I'd always thought I'd meet someone, but I never imagined a life without being a mum," she said.

After several setbacks, she gave birth to a daughter, Rose.

Storey had one embryo remaining from the same cycle and, after Rose's first birthday, she decided to have it transferred. The pregnancy was successful, and nine months later she gave birth to a second daughter, Ava.

Prepared to face some judgment for her choice to be a single mother, Storey said her decision was greeted instead with encouragement and support from family, friends and the broader society.

"I never expected to have so much acceptance when I took the plunge," she said. "I wake up in the morning and I still can't believe I've got two beautiful girls."



Storey's fertility specialist at IVF Australia, Dr Manny Mangat, said the number of solo mothers and modern families using IVF would continue to increase due to a recent update to the definition of infertility that makes single women and same-sex couples eligible for Medicare rebates on IVF treatment.

The ANZARD report confirmed alarming variations in success rates between fertility clinics. One clinic had a success rate (live births per initiated cycle) of just 4.5 per cent, and another clinic just 5.5 per cent.

Dr Petra Wale, president of the Fertility Society of Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ), said factors such as age, treatment type and individual medical history affect IVF success, and smaller clinics with fewer patients could be disadvantaged compared with large metropolitan providers.

But Chambers said the wide variations in clinic success rates could not be explained by patient characteristics.

The clinics are not identified in the report. Providers are not obligated to publish their success rates on the federal government-funded website Your IVF Success.

This masthead asked FSANZ to identify the two poorly performing clinics. FSANZ said the organisation only received a de-identified report.

But the University of NSW provides the Reproductive Technology Accreditation Committee (RTAC), which sits under FSANZ, a detailed annual report "identifying clinics whose success rates fall well below RTAC standards".

"As the regulator of the IVF sector, it's up to RTAC to action this information," Chambers said.

Next week, Australian Health Minister Mark Butler and his state and territory counterparts will receive the findings of a rapid review into the fertility industry that was triggered by a slew of high-profile mix-ups.

This week, ABC News reported serious issues at Queensland Fertility Group (QFG) resulted in a biracial baby being born to a white couple.

A spokesperson for Virtus Health, which owns QFG, said the mistake occurred under the company's previous owner and predated mandatory adverse reporting to the regulator.

"We empathise with the family concerned and recognise the lasting emotional toll this experience has had," they said.

Butler called the reports "appalling" and flagged a potential federal takeover of the industry's regulation, particularly sperm donor laws.

Chambers said it was important that patients have trust in the IVF industry through independent oversight, auditing and transparency in terms of IVF clinic performance.

Wale said an independent regulator would improve transparency, but she did not want to see a situation where the data "becomes a league table with less focus on patient care".

"This could result in outcomes such as clinics being closed if they do not reach an internal benchmark, which could then negatively impact equitable access to fertility treatment, especially in regional areas with fewer patients," she said.

IVF in Australia and New Zealand at a glance

- 20,417 IVF babies were born in 2023
- IVF babies accounted for about one in every 16 births in Australia and one in eight births to women aged 35 and older
- The live birth rate per initiated cycle was 23.8 per cent
- About 46 per cent of cycles involving single females were to freeze eggs
- Four cycles involved single men, and 59 cycles involved male same-sex couples with donor egg or embryos and surrogates.

- Sydney Morning Herald

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