

## CHANNEL 9 "SUNDAY" COVER STORY

# Missed conceptions: Part 1

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It's been dubbed "baby hunger" — an intense craving for a child that many women endure, which is emerging as a crisis for an increasing number of 30-somethings. There's a rising panic at the realisation by many women that it might be all too late to get pregnant. As young women delay and delay their baby-making, they are dramatically reducing their chances of ever being a mother.

As fertility expert Dr Ric Porter told *Sunday*, "They're pushing their baby-making years to their mid to late 30s, and they're paying for it." Paying for it, by missing out. The fertility experts are so concerned about this trend that they are telling women: "Have your babies first, careers second."

The pain and anguish for women who find out all too late that they will be childless, and *not* by choice, is palpable and poignant.

Journalist and television newsreader Virginia Haussegger admitted to *Sunday*: "The desire to have a child, possibly when you know you probably can't, is just overwhelming. The force of it is ferocious. It can knock you off balance."

Former high-profile publisher, and now author, Sophie Cunningham, said: "The fact that I felt depressed and I thought about it all the time ... it does become an obsession."

These women are now grieving for lost opportunities and missed conceptions.

Many women in their late 30s are shocked and saddened that they might be denied life's big choices — to have a baby and a life beyond their briefcase.

It's happening because of an extraordinary ignorance about the truth on fertility.

It's a myth to think you can delay having babies until your late 30s — the big fertility myth.

As *Sunday* explains, most women don't know their fertility starts to dive at the tender age of 27. Most believe they can leave it until their mid to late 30s — even 40 years of age — before they try to have a baby. But as they approach that age, they're discovering just how hard it is to find a great relationship and to get pregnant, and it becomes the great tragedy of their life.

As one career-minded woman tells *Sunday*: "I'm disappointed I invested so much time and energy into a career, that in the end is just a job, really!"

Not only is the distinct shift to older motherhood creating a rapidly growing group of women who will be childless, but also an increasing number of women who think they can rely on IVF or other fertility treatments to bail them out, only to be disappointed that IVF success rates are actually very low as women approach 40.

And next week, in part two of our report, Helen Dalley will look at the boom in IVF, as older women increasingly queue up at fertility clinics.

## Film Transcript ...

SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM READS EXTRACT: "The most depressed I've ever been was when I longed for a child in my early-30s. The experience was intense beyond imagining and I would gasp in pain or cry whenever I saw a baby."

HELEN DALLEY: It's been dubbed 'baby hunger', a deep intense and unrequited craving for a child that so many women endure. And it's emerging as a crisis facing an increasing number of 30-somethings. In this country, largely a hidden problem discussed in hushed tones among close friends is the rising panic and stark realisation by many women that it might be all too late.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER, JOURNALIST: The desire to have a child, possibly when you know you probably can't, is just overwhelming. But the force of it is ferocious when it's there and it can knock you sideways, it can knock

you off balance.

SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM READS EXTRACT: "I wanted a child so much and felt such anger that I did not have one that I was in some ways quite mad.

SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM: 'Mad' is a slightly melodramatic word, but I think the fact that I felt sort of depressed and I thought about it all the time, I think if any emotion is just swamping you constantly the edges are flirting with - not madness - but it does become an obsession.

HELEN DALLEY: This morning, an insight into the generation who thought they could have it all, who were promised it all, yet many of them are now shocked and saddened that they may be denied life's big choices - to have a baby, a family, a life beyond the briefcase.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: It's crap. It's crap! We can't have it all. We can't even have it, as some older feminists have said to me, "Oh, but Virginia we never said you could have it all at once. You can have it at different times." Well, that's crap too. As any woman who delays having children knows, there is a cost to all our choices.

HELEN DALLEY: For many women who are childless, it's certainly not by choice. For some, it's the result of decisions made in earlier years. For others, simply fate.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: There are a lot of women, like me, that cocked it up and then were really shocked when they found out that things like medical intervention couldn't fix things or that they'd left it too late.

HELEN DALLEY: Bombarded with images of older celebrity mums who appear to cruise effortlessly into motherhood, it's little wonder that women believe they can easily delay having a baby to their mid- to late-30s, even early-40s, but it turns out to be a myth - the big fertility myth.

DOMINIQUE OGILVIE, FASHION AGENT: I absolutely thought I'd be in control - had always been in control of everything, in other aspects of my life, but it wasn't until my husband and I were having trouble having a baby that I felt totally out of control and I found that really hard to deal with.

HELEN DALLEY: Women brave enough to admit they might have seriously misjudged baby-making or been blithely ignorant about their fertility now grieve for lost opportunities and missed conceptions.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: It is a matter of cocking it up, because you can't undo your declining or, you know, dead fertility. We can't undo this. It's not like I can say, "OK, look, I never finished that MBA or that PhD, I'll go back to it later on." You can't go back to having children. You can't go back and repair busted fertility organs. It just doesn't work.

HELEN DALLEY: For others still powering up the career ladder, or who haven't found the right partner yet, there's a growing sense of fear it might end in tears.

SHERI, MARKETING EXECUTIVE: It's very important to me - not just the child - but to have a partner and somebody to share my life with. And it would be very sad if I missed out, I think.

HELEN DALLEY: According to the experts, these women's experience is not just an exception - they are now more the rule.

HUGH MACKAY, SOCIAL RESEARCHER: There's no question that Australian women are now having babies later, having the first baby later, and fewer babies, than ever in our history. We are as a society, and relative to total population size, we are currently engaged in producing the smallest generation of children Australia has ever seen.

DR RICK PORTER, IVF AUSTRALIA: They're pushing their baby-making years to their middle- to late-30s now and they're paying for it.

HELEN DALLEY: Paying for it in what the fertility experts now call social infertility.

DR BEVERLY VOLLENHOVEN, MONASH IVF: Wanting to become pregnant till later on.

HELEN DALLEY: So it's age-related infertility not a medical problem?

DR BEVERLY VOLLENHOVEN: Well, I guess it's difficult to separate whether age-related infertility is actually a medical problem. It becomes a medical problem. But, you know, it may be that a woman has left it for too long. But not always by her own choice.

HELEN DALLEY: Put more bluntly, for a multitude of reasons, women are delaying having babies so long, that for many it could be too late.

PROFESSOR BOB BIRRELL, DEMOGRAPHER, MONASH UNIVERSITY: We're projecting of the order of about 20 per cent of women in their 20s now will end up childless. Women who were in their 20s in the '50s and '60s, it was about 10 per cent, so we're projecting a doubling.

HELEN DALLEY: A doubling who will remain childless?

PROF. BOB BIRRELL: That's right.

HELEN DALLEY: Since the height of the post-war baby boom Australia's overall fertility rate has slumped. In 1961, Australian women had 3.6 babies each. Now it's less than half that - just 1.7 babies per woman, and still falling. The stats plainly show the distinct shift to older motherhood. In just the past two decades, the number of babies born to 20- to 24-year-old women has almost halved, yet there are more women having first babies at 30 to 35 years of age and the average age of having a first baby has edged up to 28 years old.

And the reason women are putting it off?

HUGH MACKAY: The greatest of the factors is the rising level of education among Australian women. This is a worldwide phenomenon, both in the West and in the Third World - the more highly educated women become, the fewer babies they have. It's almost like a law of nature.

HELEN DALLEY: So it's a direct correlation?

HUGH MACKAY: Absolutely.

HELEN DALLEY: The more educated you are, the less babies you will have?

HUGH MACKAY: Generally speaking.

DR RICK PORTER: They put their careers first. They're finding it harder to find a male who will commit. I think males are part of the reason this problem arises. And lastly, I think they believe maybe the technology will save them, so if all else fails they'll resort to something like IVF, which is just not the way it's supposed to work.

HELEN DALLEY: These seismic changes push us further down the path of more childlessness and one-child families.

HUGH MACKAY: There's no good pretending we aren't in the midst of a genuine revolution. This is serious stuff, reflected in the fact that the marriage rate is the lowest it has been for a hundred years and falling. Reflected in the fact that Australian households are smaller than they have ever been in our history. Fifty per cent of our households contain only one or two people. People who live alone or with just one other person are now mainstream. Married couples with three or four kids are now part of the eccentric fringe.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: I think more important than the stats are the personal crises, the lives that people are living, the disappointments that people are living with, I mean, the permeating effect of that on our community, that's perhaps our crisis.

HELEN DALLEY: Newsreader and journalist Virginia Haussegger's personal crisis came at what she considered the tender age of 38. After blithely sailing through her adult years, she was finally confronted with the truth in a doctor's surgery.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: And he asked me if I had any children and I said no, but that was a possibility or something I was hoping to do and he looked at me as if I was nuts, and he said, "But you're 38." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Don't you think you're leaving it a bit late?" or words to that effect. I remember being really shocked, thinking, "Most of my life I've been young." And no - honestly, at that time or up to that time, I had never thought I would be too old. And as it turned out I probably am.

HELEN DALLEY: Like many her age, Virginia says as a teenager she soaked up the mantra preached by feminists in the 1970s.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: It was about the theme of motherhood, how motherhood would end your career, how motherhood would stop you moving forward and that it was a blight on women. Motherhood also - one of the key messages from the second wave of feminism was that motherhood was devalued and mothering was a waste of talent.

HELEN DALLEY: Virginia wrote of her frustration and anger in a newspaper article more than a year ago. Headlined "The sins of our feminist mothers", the piece unleashed a torrent of debate about her childless predicament and whether feminism was to blame.

EVA COX, FEMINIST: Rubbish! Sorry. Not on. I was in there - I was a mother at that stage. I had a young child. I would have been very conscious of the fact that people were saying that. We didn't denigrate motherhood, we didn't downgrade motherhood.

EVA COX GRAB FROM NEWSCLIP: Women are oppressed because they're women. We know that a lot of people are oppressed for a variety of reasons but women are oppressed just simply because they happen to be born women.

ANN SUMMERS, FEMINIST WRITER: I honestly think that Virginia was not listening properly or was mishearing the message because the message has always been about choice. The message of the women's movement has never been don't be a mother, don't have children. And when you give women choice, it's amazing how few want to tie themselves to the kitchen sink.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: At the time I wrote that I was angry. Who was I angry at? I was angry at myself. When I was looking up there at the next career jump I wanted to make, no, I wasn't thinking about my fertility at all. I wish I had.

HELEN DALLEY: Virginia says she fits a classic picture. She climbed the corporate ladder. Her marriage then ended and short-term relationships followed. No time or thought for babies.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: I spent probably my important fertile years in my mid-30s having short-term inappropriate relationships and no relationships. I didn't actually really fall in love in a situation that would have been conducive to parenthood until it was kind of too late.

HELEN DALLEY: Former book publisher, now writer, Sophie Cunningham agrees, saying she also wasted too many years on too many inappropriate relationships.

SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM: I really needed to be kind of looking for people who wanted a family rather than pursuing people who often made it very clear that wasn't their agenda.

HELEN DALLEY: Why do you think you weren't looking for the right sort of bloke?

OPHIE CUNNINGHAM: An attachment to drama - like in the high drama of dramatic love affairs - and not valuing a gentle, constructive, supportive, loving relationship.

HELEN DALLEY: Had you been reading too many Austen novels?

SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM: Bronte - too much Bronte - all those Heathcliffs. I chased them forever.

HELEN DALLEY: But for women like 35-year-old marketing executive Sheri, it's not a matter of chasing Heathcliffs, but simply finding a bloke willing to commit to a meaningful relationship, let alone a baby, is the major hurdle.

SHERI: I don't know where all the men are hiding - I don't know.

HELEN DALLEY: Sheri is all too acutely aware of time slipping away.

SHERI: Given how old I am now, if I met somebody tomorrow and fell madly in love, you want to give that relationship time to work, and realistically I don't have that much time, I guess.

HELEN DALLEY: While Sheri and her friends have full, busy lives and great jobs, they all thought they'd be mothers by the age of 30.

SHERI: I know heaps of women in my position. When you go out in a big group, and say there's 12 of you sitting around the table, you just sort of think, "Well, the odds are that some of us aren't going to meet somebody." That's really sad.

HELEN DALLEY: This pattern resonates with many women. Researchers say that the social and technological upheaval of the past four decades has affected a whole generation and is likely to continue for some generations to come.

HUGH MACKAY: And what it's taught this generation is keep your options open, hang loose, don't get too committed too soon, wait and see. The generational question for young Australians today is - 'What else is there?'. It's a heightened desire to postpone commitment - not that we'll never commit - but we postpone commitment while we're exploring the options. And it's not, of course, a generational attitude that favours marriage or parenthood.

HELEN DALLEY: Why not?

HUGH MACKAY: Well, because those things are about commitment.

HELEN DALLEY: *Sunday* brought together this group of women in their mid- to late-20s to gauge just where babies might fit into their filo fax.

KAREN YAP: Career comes first - I guess I also think about my lifestyle. I'm very happy with my lifestyle at the moment. And to think about responsibility for another child isn't really on the game card at the moment.

EMMA FLOWERS: There's too many things that I want to do before I can give myself to a child.

KATE DALE: Well, I always thought by the time I'm 30 I'm going to be married and have children and play happy families, but it hasn't turned out like that, and that's, you know, that's fine. I find it hard enough to cook myself dinner at night, let alone, you know, look after a child. So ...

HELEN DALLEY: Not on your horizon yet?

KATE DALE: No. I'm too selfish.

HELEN DALLEY: Unlike their mothers and grandmothers before them, these young women want economic security before they'll even think of kids. Already saddled with hefty debt from education and easy credit, a child is just another expense to factor into their bottom line.

KAREN YAP: I think about can I afford my own lifestyle let alone half a baby. You know, I can't even afford a baby hand at this point in time, let alone my own lifestyle.

HELEN DALLEY: So the financial security is really important to you?

KAREN YAP: It is.

HELEN DALLEY: But in their highly prioritised life plans, babies will just fall into place and at the right - if somewhat delayed - time.

CLARE NADIN: I probably wouldn't want to be having children later than late-30s.

HELEN DALLEY: So late-30s you might stretch it out. Why do you think you can stretch it out to late-30s?

CLARE NADIN: We just think we can.

RACHEL MAROMIBTO: Other people do it as well, I guess. You see people do it and you assume you'll have the same opportunities.

CLARE NADIN: It's like with anything - I'm not going to get hit by a car or get skin cancer from sunbaking - I'm going to be able to fall pregnant when I want to as well. I don't know if it's naivety.

HELEN DALLEY: Naivety perhaps. But if 40 is the new 30 and 30 the new 20, there should be plenty of time to have children later. Well, not if you come up against the immutable force of biology.

DR RICK PORTER: All your eggs as a woman are made before you are born, when you are still this long inside your mother, you make millions of eggs. But you only start releasing eggs, called ovulation, from puberty through to the menopause. So the problem is when you're 40 years of age you are ovulating a 40-year-old egg.

DOMINIQUE OGILVIE: I didn't know the eggs we are born with are the eggs with me today. So these eggs are 40-odd years old. They're tired.

HELEN DALLEY: If you look at a woman's reproductive life, from the age of 18 to 27, the experts say there is no difference in her ability to fall pregnant. Her chances are the same. But what many women don't realise is that from the relatively young age of 27, their fertility starts to dive.

DR RICK PORTER: From 27 through to 35 you're probably looking at a reduction of 5 per cent to 10 per cent per cycle. So at the age of 35 your chances of getting pregnant are probably in the order of only 15 per cent chance per cycle of getting pregnant.

HELEN DALLEY: That's pretty small.

DR RICK PORTER: It is, it is.

HELEN DALLEY: Our fertility then plummets after age 35.

DR RICK PORTER: So by the time you're over 40, the chances of conceiving in any one cycle are probably less than 5 per cent per cycle.

HELEN DALLEY: So 1 per cent or 2 per cent chance, over 40, of conceiving naturally?

DR RICK PORTER: Yep.

HELEN DALLEY: And going through and having the baby?

DR RICK PORTER: That's right.

HELEN DALLEY: Yet a lot of women think even now at 32 or 33, "I can probably sneak in another five to eight years, I can probably get to 40 and then I better start having my babies." Do you find that attitude?

DR RICK PORTER: That attitude is quite common, that women are wishing to push their babies to the late-30s. I would just like them to bring it back five years. Five years makes a huge difference to their chances of achieving a successful and normal, healthy baby.

HELEN DALLEY: This information shattering some fertility myths might be in the biology books, but it's not getting out there. How much do any of you know about your own fertility?

ALL: Zero. Nothing.

HELEN DALLEY: Would it shock you to know your fertility declines enormously after the age of 27?

KAREN YAP: Twenty-seven? Yes.

CLARE NADIN: That shocks me!

RACHEL MAROMIBTO: That's very surprising. I wouldn't have thought that at all.

HELEN DALLEY: And despite advances in medical technology, there are still dangers inherent in older-age pregnancy. What are the dangers of delaying having a baby to your mid- to late- 30s?

DR RICK PORTER: Well, there are well-documented problems associated with being an older mother. One, it's harder to get pregnant - your eggs are older. Secondly, you're more likely to miscarry. Thirdly, even if the baby is born, it's more likely to have some abnormalities. Those are the three major areas that are directly related to mother's age. So we still have the problem that over the age of 40 the miscarriage rate probably runs close to 50 per cent.

DEBORAH THOMAS: When I grew up, no-one said to me, "If you don't have a baby by this stage in life, you're not going to have one." It was just something later, later, later.

HELEN DALLEY: Deborah Thomas, the high-profile editor of the *Australian Women's Weekly*, defied the odds when it came to falling pregnant naturally.

DEBORAH THOMAS: I was the classic, "Oops, I forgot to have a baby." It wasn't until I fell pregnant at 42 that I even thought about it. I think I'm the classic baby boomer who's never really grown up. But late-30s, I didn't feel like I was 40 years old. Life was good.

HELEN DALLEY: Despite her delight at being pregnant and having got the all-clear on genetic abnormalities Deborah then experienced a trauma she did not expect - the reality that up to half of pregnancies to women over 40 never go full term.

DEBORAH THOMAS: Then at around 20, 21 weeks, I came home and I realised that something was wrong, that, um, I don't know how to put this in a medical term, but basically there was some sort of leakage from the sac.

HELEN DALLEY: After two weeks lying flat on her back in hospital, the unthinkable happened.

DEBORAH THOMAS: They told me I was in labour and this baby was going to be born between 22 and 23 weeks and whilst he would be born alive there was no chance that he could survive.

HELEN DALLEY: How did that affect you?

DEBORAH THOMAS: Um ...you know, I don't ... it just was probably the most tragic, awful thing that's ever happened to me in my life. Sorry, that happens every time. I'm sorry. So I figured, "Well, that was my chance." And I probably consoled myself in some way thinking even though I didn't have a live baby, I had for a moment experienced the joy of anticipating a baby, the joy of being pregnant. I sort of satisfied myself that I had known what it was like for a moment to just touch being pregnant and the joy of a new life. Oh, God! I can't believe I'm still doing this, sorry. Anyway.

HELEN DALLEY: Sophie Cunningham describes her intense longing for a baby also as a kind of grief when she finally discovered fertility problems might rob her of a chance at motherhood.

SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM: It was like a loss for a child. I often have dreamt - I have a specific baby in my head, a little girl. I was missing her, this child that wasn't born. It was almost like losing someone I knew, even though she hadn't been born yet.

HELEN DALLEY: So it was pretty intense?

SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. A lot of friends were starting to have children. I'd go to birthday parties and leave them in tears. I'd see kids in the street and just feel - just start to cry.

HELEN DALLEY: Sophie says that intensity has since subsided. She's now happier and gaining acclaim as a first-time novelist. But she wrestled with the baby hunger for a couple of years, and although now 40, she says she'd still like a child.

SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM: There's a certain narcissism in our culture. I think children can certainly snap people out of that. It grows people up. Children make people more grown-up. And I'd quite like to be a proper grown-up.

JANE NICHOLS: Having a baby is the most magical, life-changing experience.

HELEN DALLEY: *Who* magazine editor Jane Nicholls came to motherhood late, having Grace two years ago. Currently pregnant, she'll be 40 when this second baby is born. But it nearly didn't happen for her, having not met her Mr Right till her mid-30s.

JANE NICHOLS: Before I was with Bernie I definitely thought I was starting to think it was likely I'd miss out. In retrospect I think, "God, if I'd missed out!" because she fills our lives. She's the most wonderful thing that's happened to us, no question. We sit there and look at each other and say, "What did we do before her?" Having come to it late, both of us, we just think, "What if we had missed out?"

HELEN DALLEY: Jane says she's now evangelical with friends and employees.

JANE NICHOLS: I am on the mount telling my friends, both male and female, to go out and do it.

HELEN DALLEY: You tell your staff and friends that?

JANE NICHOLS: Yes, and definitely I have young girls working for me in good relationships, who have bought houses with their men or whatever, really want to have babies, but keep saying, "Oh, a couple more years off the mortgage." Here's the problem, though. I'm telling people, "Don't believe you can wait." And they don't believe me because they think I'm a loony old mum. Do it, do it, do it!

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: I'm disappointed that I invested so much energy and time into a career that in the end is just a job really.

HELEN DALLEY: Now in a loving stable relationship, Virginia Haussegger is frustrated she discovered her fertility problems too late and angry about other choices she made.

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGGER: Why did I believe or think that I was going to get life's fulfilment out of my job, out of a career? Having children - I now see that as the most valuable thing that you can do as a human being and I don't think anything can take the place of that at all.

HELEN DALLEY: When the baby plan doesn't go according to plan, many couples turn to IVF and other fertility treatments. In next week's *Sunday* program, we look at the boom in IVF as older women increasingly queue up at fertility clinics. But, as we'll show, there's a harsh reality check at the door.

DR BEVERLEY VOLLENHOVEN: Technology is such that it's seen as a cure-all, we can fix anything. What women don't realise is we can't fix that, we can't fix their eggs.

DR RICK PORTER: Babies first, career second. We need to keep telling our women to think about their babies. Put baby-making higher up the priority list on what it's like to be a successful person. You can be a successful person because you're a mum equally as because you've broken the glass ceiling.

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