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Layoffs in health research put safety, access to care at risk

By Michael Frerichs

When Erica and I wanted to have children, we needed reproductive health care. The in vitro fertilization process took several years, and it exacted a physical and emotional toll. Now, when we look at our soon-to-be two-year-olds Max and Theo running around the house playing and laughing, we are so thankful IVF was available.

So, you can imagine our outrage when we found out President Trump and Elon Musk laid off the very federal experts who work to ensure IVF is safe and accessible. Couples who are hoping and praying for the miracle of childbirth stand to lose information about IVF clinic safety and treatment options, which could decrease their chances of success.

I am calling on these cuts to be immediately rescinded. Stop putting women's health at risk and bring these people back to work.

It's understandable if you weren't aware of the Trump-Musk Department of Health and Human Services layoffs that dismantled women's reproductive health efforts at the CDC. Important decisions impacting so many Americans get lost in the daily chaos of this cruel and uncaring presidency, and that's by design.

Recognizing the need to protect women, more than 30 years ago, Congress required the federal government to gather information on questions that include whether women gave birth to multiple babies or had the babies prematurely. The idea was to ensure IVF safety and gather data on how to improve it.

A wealth of information was made available for couples considering the procedure, including an "IVF success estimator" where people provided information and received an estimate of their chances that the process would work. Success rates for the 500 or so U.S. clinics also were tracked. And important IVF research was done, including how to make it more affordable and reduce side effects for women trying to conceive.

That information is important to women and couples trying to start a family. It helps establish trust around a health care option that's highly personal. IVF comes with side effects, and couples who try the procedure already are stressed out and frustrated. Trump's thoughtless decisions shouldn't add to that emotional toll. Erica and I were grateful this information was available to us. Nearly 5,000 babies were born in Illinois in 2021 through the use of assisted reproductive technologies. Many of the babies are born to suburban women, including Erica, who was born in Arlington Heights, grew up in Palatine and graduated from Naperville North High School.

Georgia Tech professor Aaron Levine worked with the now-laid-off CDC team and took a dim view of what the lack of information will mean.

"The data was produced at the clinic level every year, so you could say, 'Is this clinic successful 15% of the time, 20% of the time, 25% of the time?'" he told NBC News. "And you can imagine that is super valuable information for patients considering IVF, or maybe considering IVF at multiple clinics, and trying to make their choices."

For some, it might be difficult to square Trump's "I'll be known as the fertilization president" braggadocio with what he's done to hurt in vitro fertilization. It shouldn't be. It's his latest attack on women's reproductive rights and safety. It was the Trump Supreme Court ruling that curbed women's reproductive rights in many states, leading to women dying instead of getting the health care they need.

Trump promised to protect IVF and make sure the government and insurance companies paid for its significant cost. So far, he formed a committee to study the issue. That's what you do in government when you want to try to score political points without actually doing something about the problem. There's no policy, no way to pay for IVF. The Trump-Musk cuts to IVF safety are part of this administration's overall attack on maternal health. Cutting off access to this kind of information is what you'd do if your approach on health care is likely to hurt women and children.

Trump doesn't care. He cares only about gutting vital government services to provide tax breaks to his billionaire cronies. We should not allow this type of corruption to stand. Certainly, families wanting to have children are more important than enriching billionaires.

- *Democrat Michael Frerichs is Illinois state treasurer.*