

Public Cervix Announcement: an interview with Hertility Health

Talking to Dr Helen O'Neill at AWS Summit, Max Lunn heard how Hertility Health is finally giving women the reproductive healthcare they need, through its at-home tests, clinical trials, accessible research and company partnerships.

Temps de lecture : minute

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'You're not ovary-acting' runs the tagline of Hertility: a research-led femtech startup in the UK. And women are not overreacting when it comes to their health: 44% of those that take Hertility's hormone and fertility test received results indicative of a diagnosis. This isn't down to selection bias, either. Dr. Helen O'Neill, one of Hertility's founders and CEO, tells me that only a very small percentage of those taking the test are actively experiencing any symptoms; most are just curious or planning for the future.

Hertility was founded in 2020 by Helen - who is also a lecturer in Reproductive and Molecular Genetics at UCL - alongside her co-founders Dr Natalie Getreu (COO) and her sister Deirdre O'Neill (CCO). Their aim is to bring reproductive science out of the lab and into the hands of every single woman worldwide.

Hertility is uncompromising in its mission to be research led and to build a startup the hard way. Helen tells me a lot more work has gone into her academic career than her startup, but that her startup is built out of her research into fertility and genetics. Her fifteen years of academic work made her realise that "all the existing data that informs current women's health is insufficient, and so you need to create that data yourself... We

rely on such poor datasets to inform clinical practice for women's health: we rely on datasets that were built on male physiology to inform women's health.”



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Given the huge expense of running the relevant trials to produce relevant data, coupled with the high stakes involved when dealing with people's health, Hertility spent a long time launching. “To do something that required an MVP simply wasn't on the cards: [for us] there are no MVPs, only completed clinical trials with results with proven datasets with defined outcomes”.

Hertility began life as a clinical trial, and now 50,000 women and children have gone through their health assessments. This research - and the data it creates - “is so powerful, to better inform about general population

trends. We tend to see only published papers that revolve around people with a known diagnosis and a few controls, whereas we have a huge control database for all different ages.” Nor does this research sit behind paywalled academic journals: Helen tells me Hertility is eager to share their research with those that made it possible, publishing reports - like this one - in language all can understand. They have also recently published the Black Women’s Health Initiative to spotlight the racial inequalities in healthcare.

Hertility’s central offering is an at-home hormone and fertility test. There are four stages to the test: a 30 question online assessment, a personalised hormone panel; an at-home blood collection kit; and, finally, a Doctor written report explaining your results. This is where 44% of women receive results that are indicative of a diagnosis. Amongst other services, they will soon offer their ‘Menopause Monit-HER Test’ which is also done from home. As Helen tells me, this is a particularly crucial area for Hertility to privately plug the gaps public health fails to cover: there is five times more research into erectile dysfunction - which affects 19% of men - than into Premenstrual Syndrome, which affects 90% of women. These aren’t nice-to-haves, but crucial tools to empower women to understand their bodies.

Hertility’s momentum demonstrates that private health companies are a highly necessary part of the ecosystem. But how can their products and services reach everyone; especially those who can’t afford them? Helen explains it’s through companies, suggesting “I think reproductive health benefits are to 2023 what mental health benefits were to 2013”. It’s a given, in other words, that this is an area that companies recognise they need to provide support for. She explains that workplaces need to be aware of and anticipate the hormonal changes that women face: whether it's general menstrual health, preconception, the fertility journey, postnatal health to perimenopause and menopause.

“We need to address what we call the elephant in the womb, which is the fact that women have a fundamental desire to have children and will inevitably question their fertility and reproductive health and the fact that we menstruate every single month, and that one in three women will have a reproductive condition”.

Hertility therefore partners with companies to address these issues. Channel 4 is one of their more high profile partners, with the broadcaster now offering reproductive health and hormone testing to its employees. I saw Helen chair a panel at London Tech Week with the Channel 4 CEO, Dr Alex Mahon and Dame Vivian Hunt of UnitedHealth Group. They candidly discussed how the absence of investment into women's health directly leads to companies struggling with performance. There was an unfortunate irony in that a noticeable number of men left the room as they began their talk.

As with other health startups like ZOE Health who build a community through their research and products, Hertility launched ‘the Mother of all crowdfunds’ earlier this year to offer this community to invest in the future of their company. Not only did they reach 203% of their target, but Helen tells me they recorded the highest ever proportion of female angel investors from any Crowdcube campaign. Helen is an impressive advocate for female founders and female investors, making abundantly clear to me just how nonsensical the unequal distribution of equity is. She was highlighted in a recent Beahurst report discussing this.

We finish by looking forwards, where Helen explains Hertility’s ambition is to be the home of women’s health. “As a woman your reproductive health and your overall health are inextricably linked: we are driven by our hormones. These are powerful chemicals that dictate our mood, weight, skin, hair, appetite, metabolism, sleep. There's literally no element of our life that isn't controlled by our hormones”.

Article by Max Lunn