Parental Infertility and Semen Quality in Male Offspring: A Follow-up Study

Cecilia Høst Ramlau-Hansen1,2, Ane Marie Thulstrup1, Jens Peter Bonde1, and Jørn Olsen2

1 Department of Occupational Medicine, Aarhus University Hospital, Aarhus, Denmark.
2 Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.

Received for publication January 26, 2007; accepted for publication March 13, 2007.

Jensen et al. (Am J Epidemiol 2007;165:583–90) reported for the first time that men whose mothers had received fertility treatment had poor semen quality. This result could be confounded by the mothers’ body mass index. Obesity is a strong predictor of fecundity and could have a programming effect on semen quality through hormonal factors or links to fetal growth. The authors of the current study tried to replicate the finding of Jensen et al. after controlling for maternal body mass index and other covariates using data from a recently conducted, population-based, Danish follow-up study on the association between maternal smoking during pregnancy in 1984–1987 and sons’ semen quality, in which the participants were sampled according to levels of maternal smoking during pregnancy. After adjustment, sons of mothers who reported that they had been examined or treated for childlessness (n = 30) had a lower sperm concentration and total sperm count and fewer motile and morphologically normal spermatozoa in comparison with sons of mothers who had not been examined or treated for childlessness (n = 295). None of the differences (except for semen concentration) between the groups reached statistical significance, but the study has limited power. The findings were in the same direction as those reported by Jensen et al. and do not indicate that their results are confounded by maternal body mass index.

body mass index; infertility; obesity; overweight; prenatal exposure delayed effects; semen; spermatozoa; sperm count

We recently conducted a population-based, follow-up study on the association between maternal smoking during pregnancy and semen quality (7). In this cohort, we have data on maternal prepregnant height and weight and can therefore examine if adjustment for body mass index eliminates an association between infertility and semen quality in the offspring.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The participants in our study were sons of mothers who, during their pregnancies from 1984 to 1987, participated in the “Healthy Habits for Two” cohort (8). The mothers provided information on lifestyle factors during pregnancy and whether they had been examined or treated for childlessness.
The information was collected by self-administered questionnaires handed out by the midwives around the 36th week of gestation. Their sons, who were alive and living in Denmark by December 2004, were identified in the Danish Civil Registration System (n = 5,109), and letters of invitation were sent to 716 of these. Since we analyzed data from a study designed to examine the association between prenatal smoking exposure and adult semen quality, the participants were selected according to levels of maternal smoking during pregnancy. A total of 347 (49 percent) men gave consent and participated in the original study. There was no difference in the proportion of men with diseases of the reproductive organs (varicocele, hydrocele, orchitis, or chlamydia—yes or no), maternal smoking during pregnancy (yes or no), and maternal prepregnant body mass index (<18.50 kg/m², 18.50–24.99 kg/m², ≥25.00 kg/m²). Abstinence time of 2 days or more, no diseases of the reproductive organs, no maternal smoking during pregnancy, and maternal prepregnant body mass index of 18.50–24.99 kg/m² are the reference categories.

| TABLE 1. Semen characteristics among 325 men living in Denmark in 2004 stratified by maternal examination or treatment for childlessness |
| Mother examined or treated for childlessness | Yes (n = 30) | No (n = 295) | p value* |
| Adjusted back-transformed mean† | 95% confidence interval | Adjusted back-transformed mean† | 95% confidence interval |
| Sperm concentration (millions/ml) | 33.1 | 19.6, 51.7 | 55.6 | 44.2, 68.8 | 0.01 |
| Semen volume (ml) | 4.0 | 3.3, 4.9 | 3.6 | 3.2, 4.0 | 0.22 |
| Sperm total count (millions) | 141 | 78, 231 | 189 | 146, 241 | 0.22 |
| Normal-morphology sperm (%) | 3.9 | 2.5, 5.7 | 5.1 | 4.1, 6.1 | 0.17 |
| Motile sperm (%) | 65 | 55, 73 | 69 | 64, 73 | 0.27 |

* Differences between means were tested by multiple regressions.
† Back-transformed means were adjusted for abstinence time (<2 days, ≥2 days), history of diseases of the reproductive organs (varicocele, hydrocele, orchitis, or chlamydia—yes or no), maternal smoking during pregnancy (yes or no), and maternal prepregnant body mass index (<18.50 kg/m², 18.50–24.99 kg/m², ≥25.00 kg/m²). The differences between the groups were statistically significant only for sperm concentration. We repeated the analysis after additional adjustment for cryptorchidism and hypospadias and found results similar to those reported in table 1.

RESULTS

The 325 participants were from 18 to 21 (median: 20) years of age. When we compared sons of mothers who reported that they had been examined or treated for childlessness (n = 30) with sons of mothers who reported that they had not been examined or treated for childlessness (n = 295), “exposed” men had a lower sperm concentration and total sperm count and fewer motile and morphologically normal spermatozoa (table 1). The differences between the groups were statistically significant only for sperm concentration. We repeated the analysis after additional adjustment for cryptorchidism and hypospadias and found results similar to those reported in table 1.

Stratification on maternal prepregnant body mass index showed tendencies toward lower sperm concentration and percentage of motile sperm among the exposed men in comparison with the “unexposed” men in all three body mass index levels (<18.50 kg/m², 18.50–24.99 kg/m², ≥25.00 kg/m²), but the association appeared to be strongest for sons of...
mothers who had a body mass index of 25.00 kg/m² or greater (numbers too small for statistical analysis).

DISCUSSION

Our data do not indicate that the results found by Jensen et al. were confounded by maternal body mass index. It is unknown whether the poor semen quality is related to infertility treatment or is caused by male or female infertility itself, for instance, through hereditary factors. It is important to get data that can address this issue, since it is plausible that some infertility treatments may impact organogenesis and function of the testis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The study was supported by the Health Insurance Foundation (grants 2004B137, 2005B081, and 2006B107), the Danish Medical Research Council (grants 22-03-0200, 22-04-0271, and 271-05-0760), the Augustinus Foundation (grant 05-2620), the Knud Højgaard Foundation (grant 37.065), the Fulbright Commission, the Simon Fougner Hartmanns Family Foundation, the Aase and Ejnar Danielsens Foundation, the University of Aarhus Research Foundation, and the Biomedical Laboratory Scientist Education and Research Fund.

The authors thank Joan Dideriksen for her important work with collecting the samples and performing the initial semen analysis.

Conflict of interest: none declared.

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