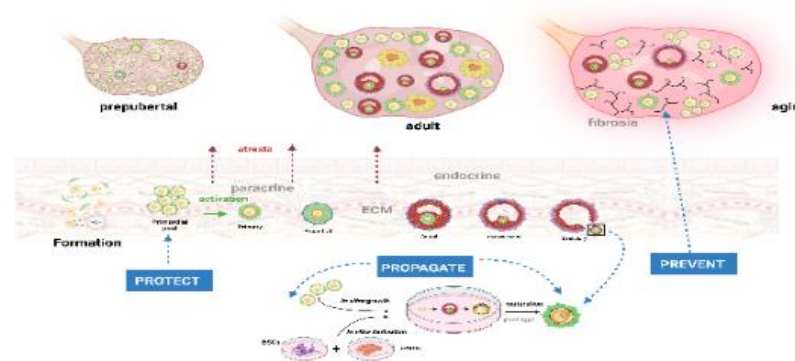


# Artificial gametes: A game-changer?

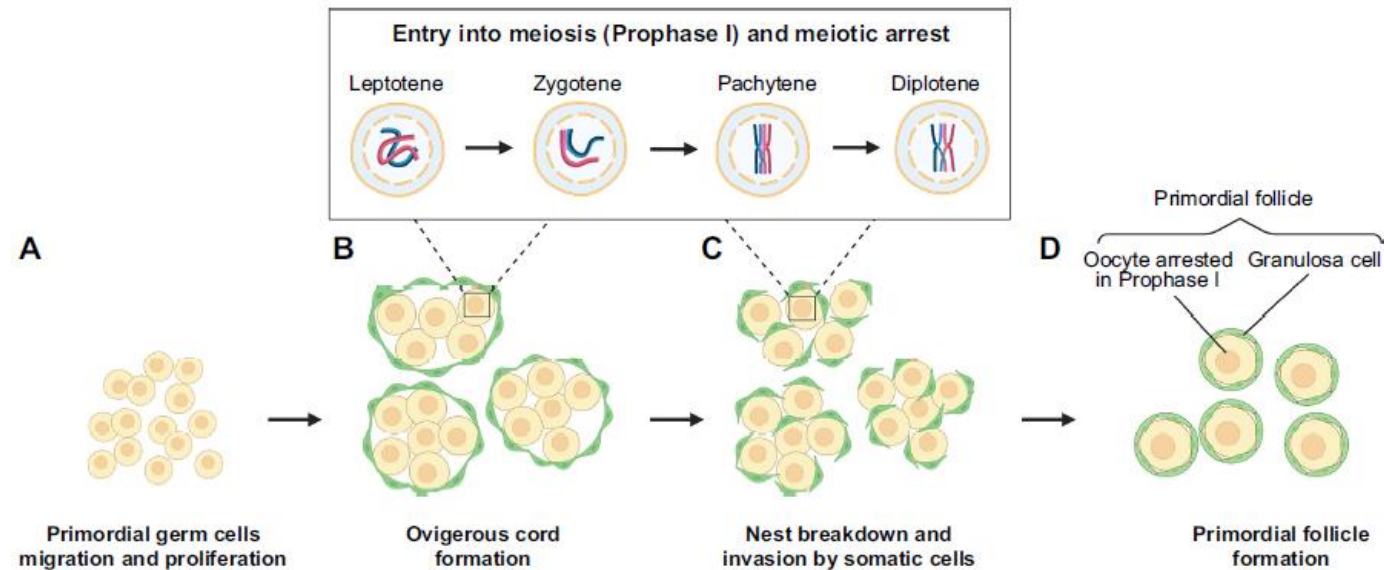
## In vitro growth and in vitro derivation of oocytes

Evelyn E Telfer

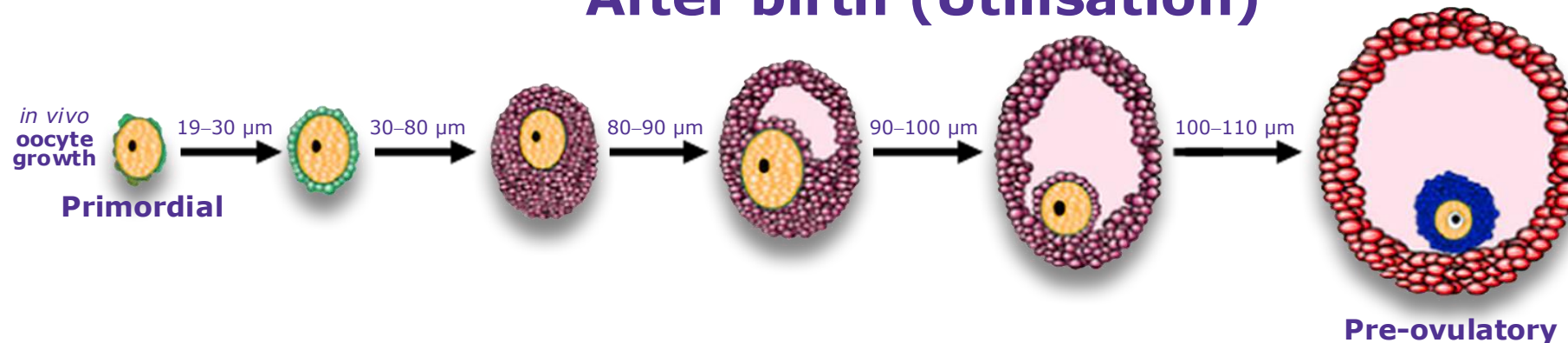
Professor, Chair in Reproductive Biology,  
The University of Edinburgh, UK



# Formation of primordial follicles



## After birth (Utilisation)



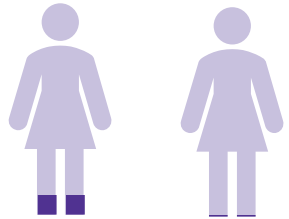
# Females are born with a fixed number of eggs



The key to your **fertility** is the age of your eggs

At birth, a woman is born with all of the eggs she will make in her **lifetime**<sup>1,2</sup>

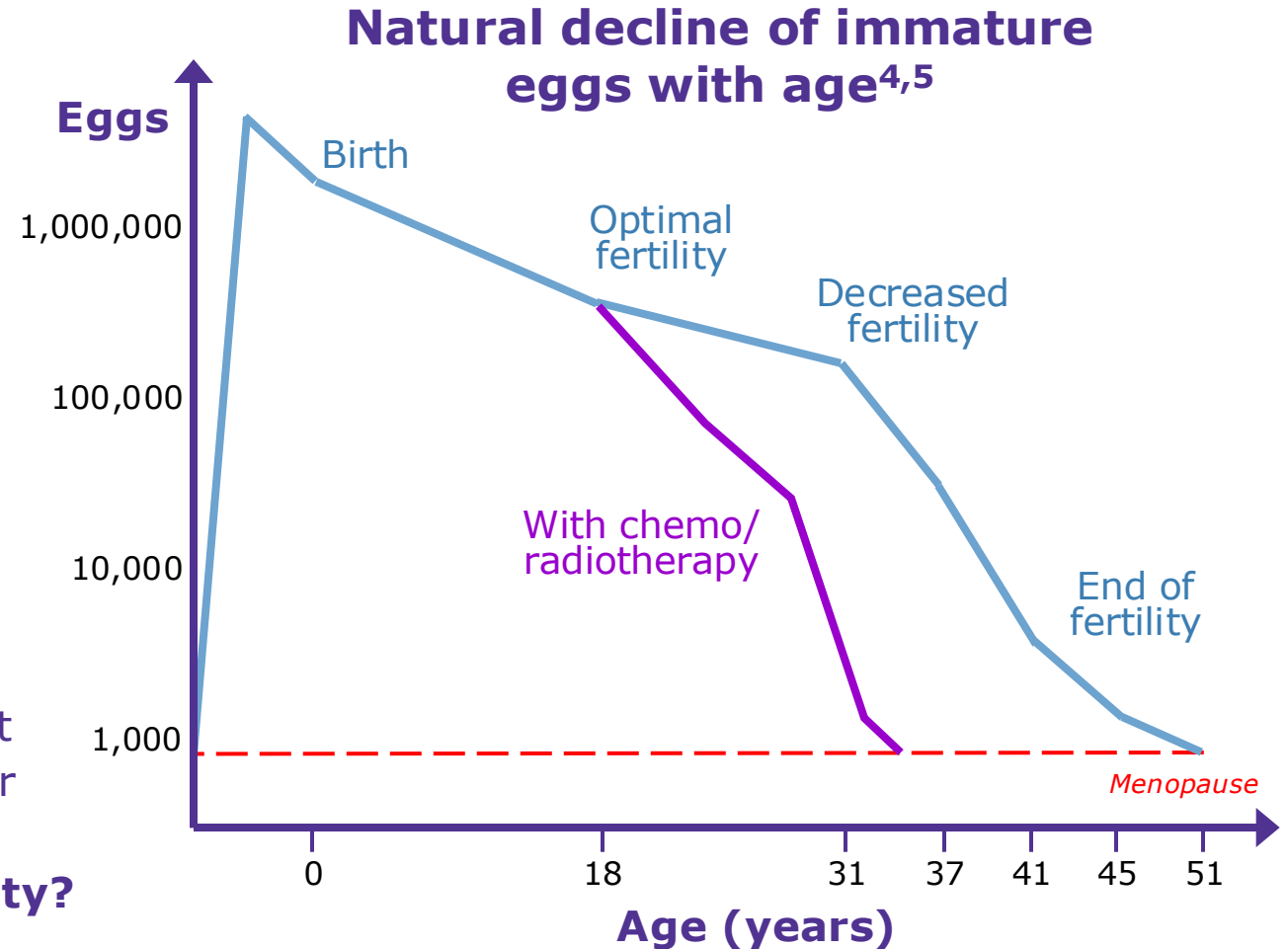
Age 30   Age 40



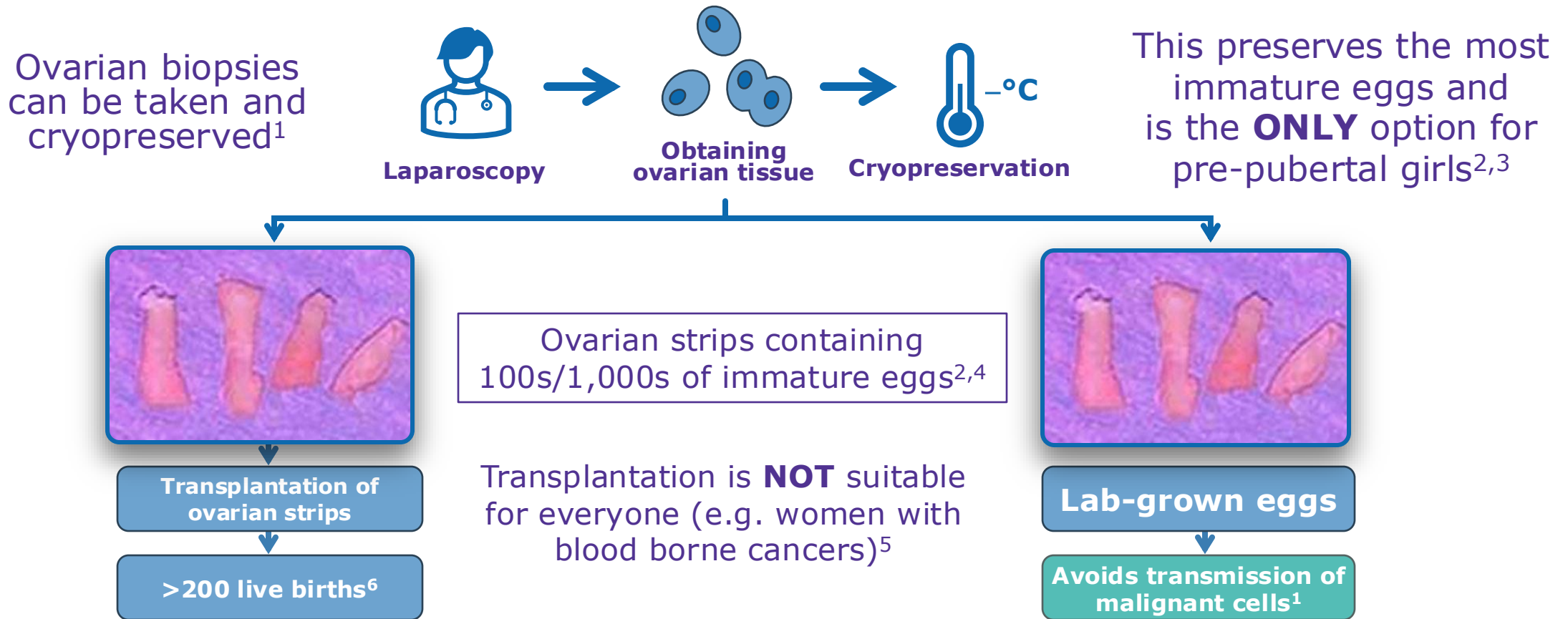
By the time a woman is 30, she has lost **90%** of her eggs, and by the time she is 40 she has lost **97%** of her eggs<sup>3</sup>

“Resting” immature eggs are used up throughout life with 99.9% degenerating and only 0.1% ever being ovulated<sup>1</sup>

**Can we save these eggs and preserve fertility?**

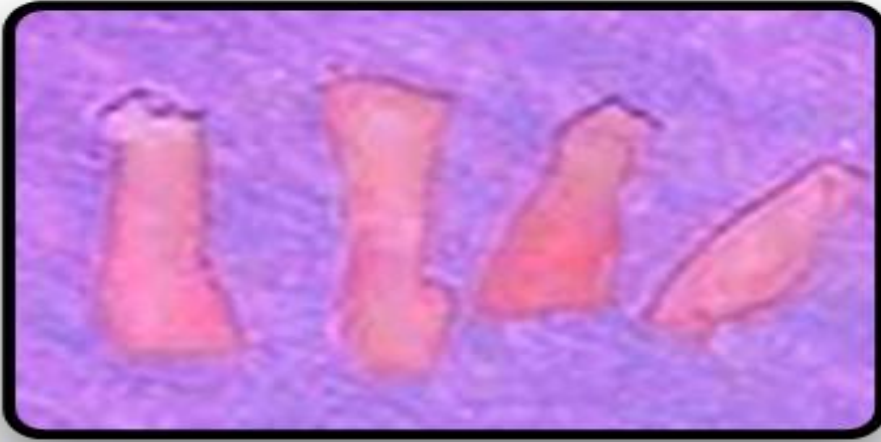


# Fertility preservation

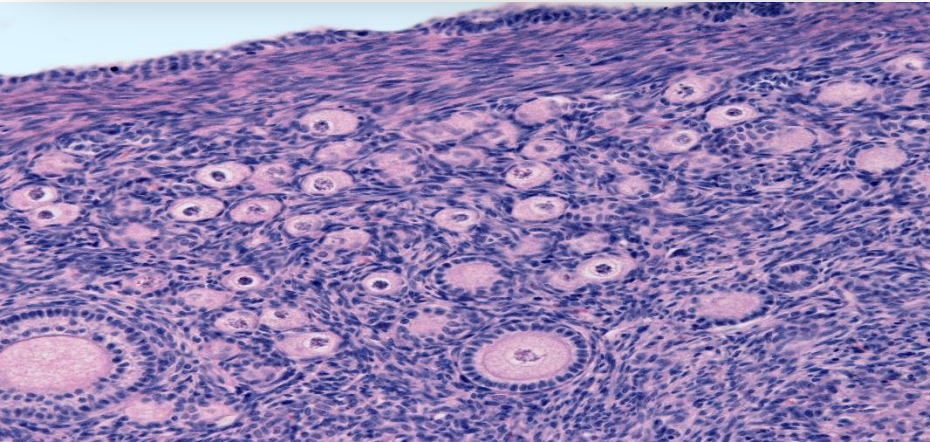


Ovarian tissue freezing developed in Edinburgh (1994) for fertility preservation<sup>1</sup>

# Human ovarian strips – Frozen for fertility preservation



Human ovarian biopsies taken for fertility preservation contain mainly primordial follicles  
**IMMATURE EGGS<sup>1</sup>**



The challenge is to develop these immature eggs in the lab to maturation and fertilisation<sup>2</sup>



# "Artificial" gametes: Oocytes

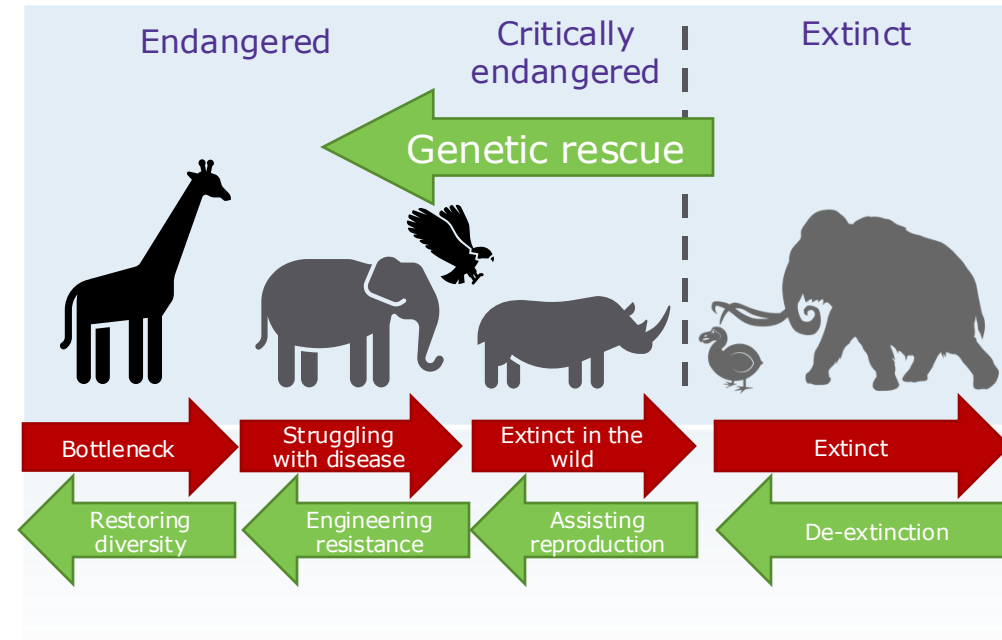
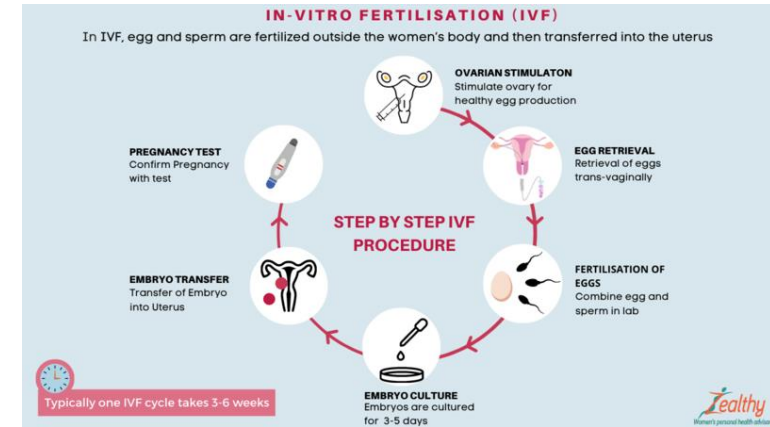
Producing mature in vitro-derived gametes either from immature gametes or from alternative sources (stem cells) would allow insights into the basic science of oogenesis, folliculogenesis and meiosis and may also offer the potential for new ART



Gametes derived in this way have been described as "**artificial gametes**" and if they are shown to be safe, they would alleviate the need for donor eggs and sperm and would enable people who cannot produce mature gametes the possibility of genetically-related children



# Lab-grown eggs have many applications



# Developing IVG systems for human oocytes: Multi-step system required



1) Optimising growth from primordial stages (activation)<sup>1</sup>

2) Supporting development of isolated growing follicles<sup>1</sup>

3) Final stages of oocyte development<sup>1</sup>

4) Testing function (meiotic and fertilisation potential) and normality



# Sources of human ovarian tissue for research



## Small strip of ovarian cortex donated after informed consent:

Caesarean section (healthy women)

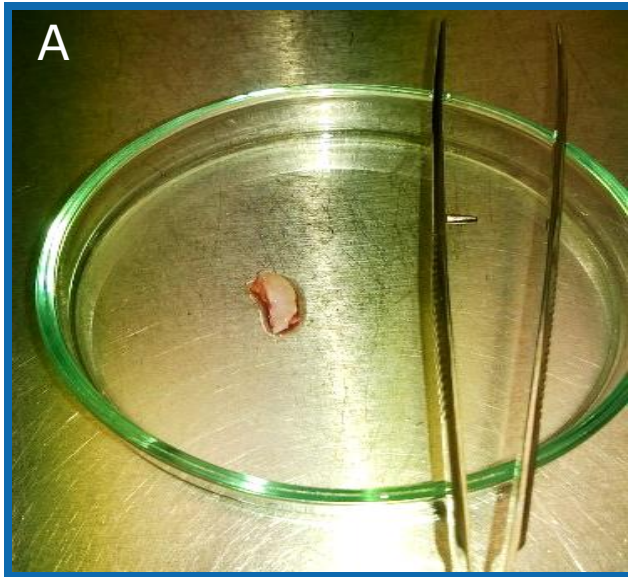
Fertility preservation (various cancers and Turner syndrome) – some tissue obtained after chemotherapy treatment

Tissue from 15 months to 45 years (fresh and cryopreserved)

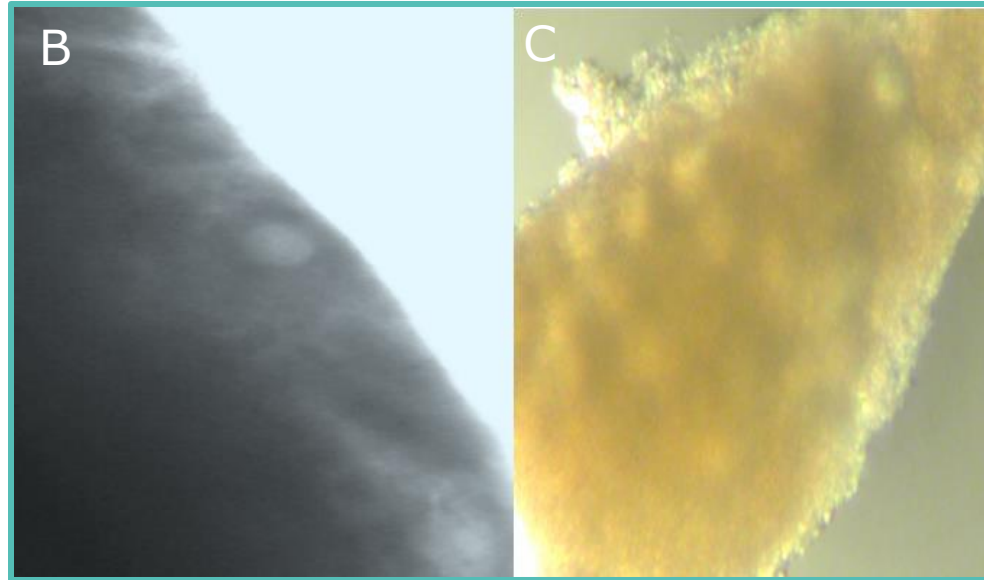
Transgender patients (whole ovaries at time of gender reassignment surgery)

**Clinical collaborators:** Richard Anderson, Hamish Wallace and Neale Watson

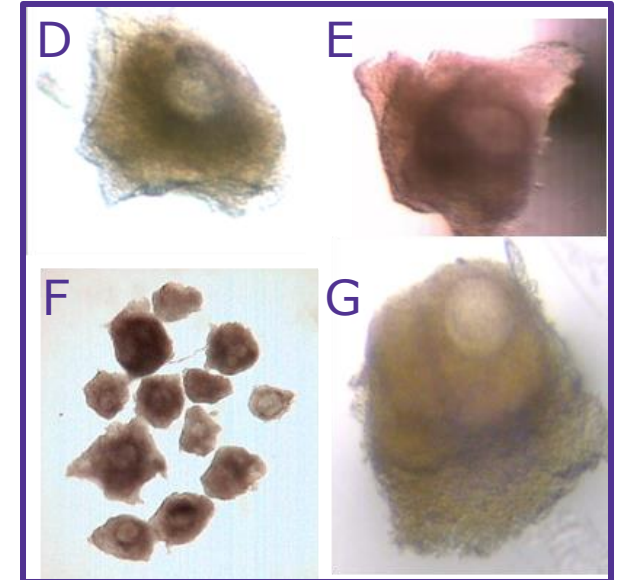
# Lab grown human eggs – Step 1: Activation and growth of resting follicles



**Piece of human ovarian tissue donated for research** – This could contain hundreds of immature eggs

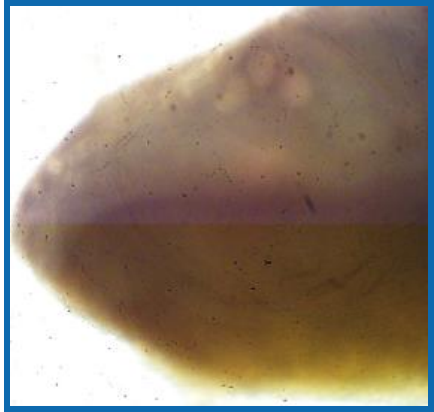


**Tissue prepared to allow growth of the immature eggs outside the body in lab conditions**

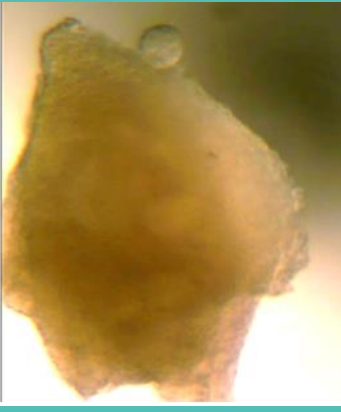
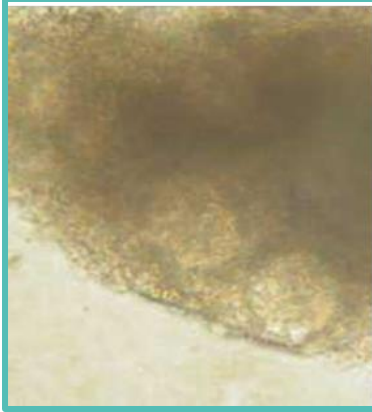


**Isolated growing follicles (6–8 days)**  
Grown in step 2  
(7–10 days)

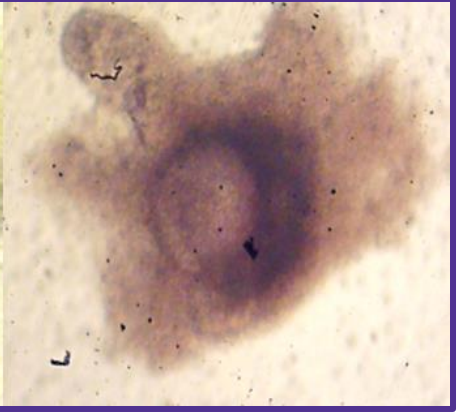
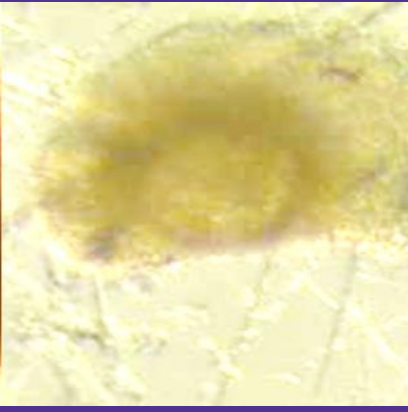
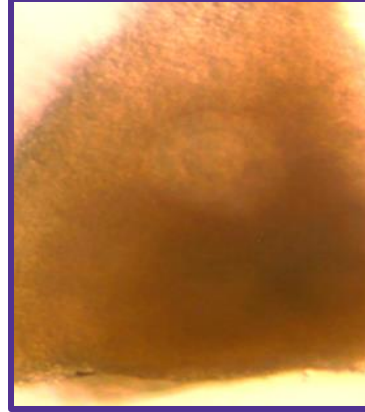
# Step 2: Isolation of growing follicles and in vitro growth



**Cultured  
micro-cortex**



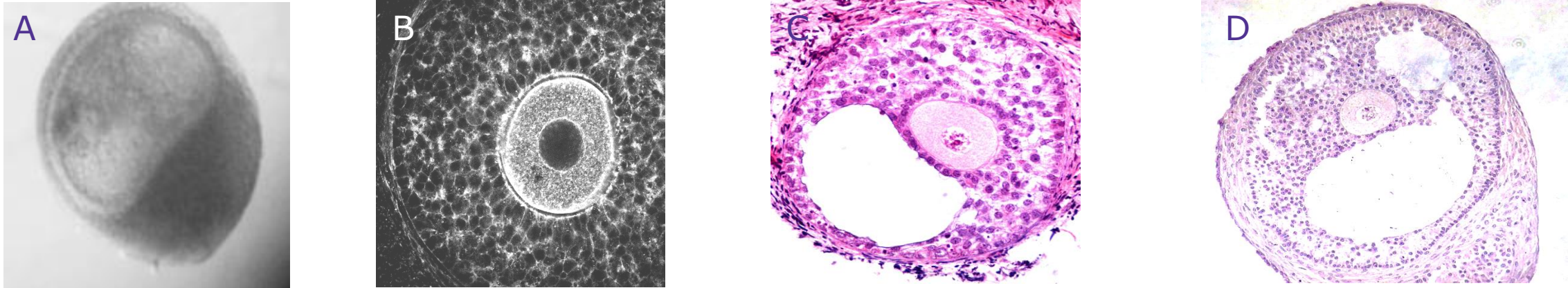
**Follicles before isolation**



**Isolated follicles**

- Manual dissection using needles and fine scalpel (no enzymes)<sup>1,2</sup>
- Follicles cultured individually in V-shaped wells (no alginate)<sup>1,2</sup>
- Activin A supplementation of medium, additional 8–10 days in vitro<sup>1,2</sup>

# Antral follicle development from primordial follicles grown in vitro after step 1 (6–8 days) and step 2 (8–10 days)



Key to growth in step 2 is maintaining cell communication. The presence of Activin supports this and it is essential to ensure that high doses of FSH are not used at this stage as this disrupts contact<sup>1,2</sup>

Human Reproduction Vol.23, No.5 pp. 1151–1158, 2008  
Advance Access publication on March 6, 2008

doi:10.1093/humrep/den070

**A two-step serum-free culture system supports development of human oocytes from primordial follicles in the presence of activin**

Evelyn E. Telfer<sup>1,3</sup>, Marie McLaughlin<sup>1</sup>, Christina Ding<sup>2</sup> and K. Joo Thong<sup>2</sup>

Molecular Human Reproduction, Vol.16, No.9 pp. 644–653, 2010  
Advanced Access publication on March 4, 2010 doi:10.1093/molehr/gaq021

**MHR**

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

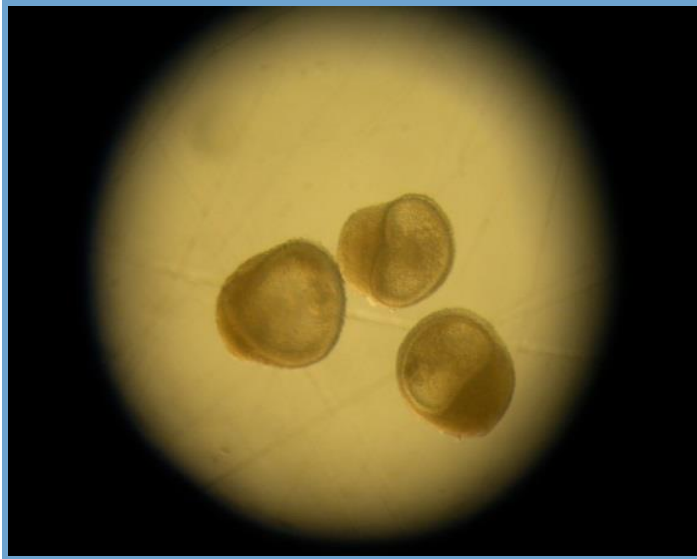
**Activin promotes follicular integrity and oogenesis in cultured pre-antral bovine follicles**

M. McLaughlin<sup>1</sup>, J.J. Bromfield<sup>2</sup>, D.F. Albertini<sup>2</sup>, and E.E. Telfer<sup>1,\*</sup>

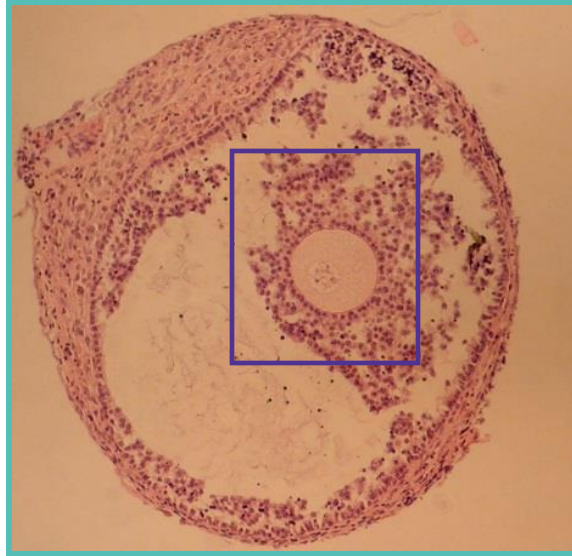
1. Telfer EE, et al. *Hum Reprod.* 2008;23:1151–8. 2. McLaughlin M, et al. *Mol Hum Reprod.* 2010;16:644–53.



# Step 3: Isolating oocyte-granulosa cell complexes



In vitro grown follicles  
(after 2 steps)<sup>1</sup>



Remove oocyte and  
surrounding cells<sup>1</sup>



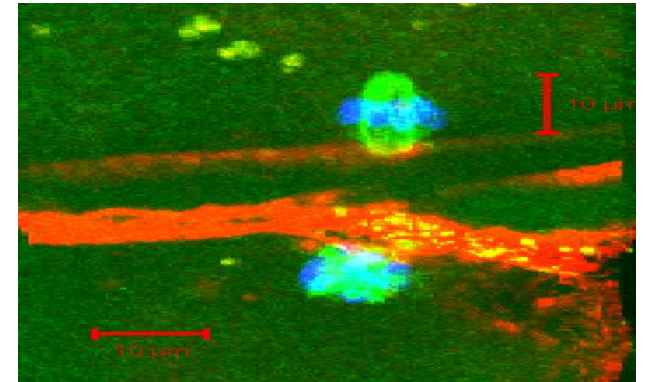
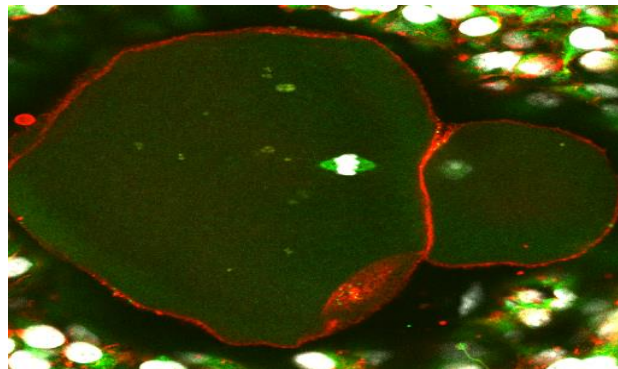
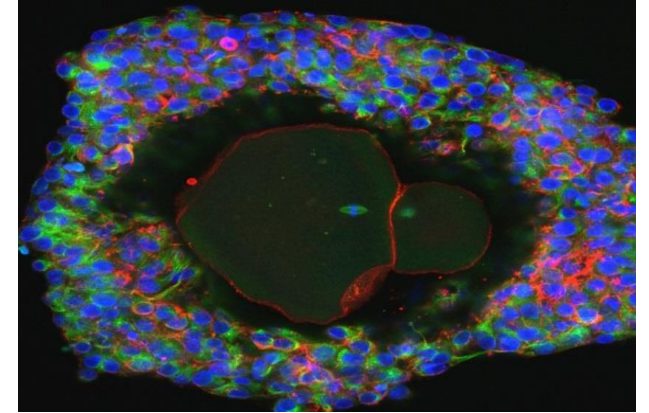
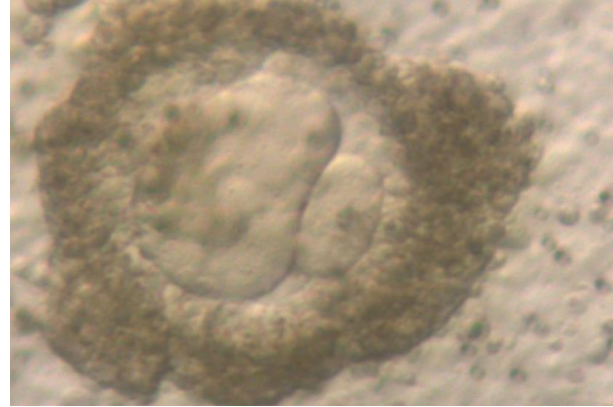
**Step 3:** Culture oocyte-  
granulosa cell complex  
on membranes<sup>1</sup>



# Step 4: In vitro maturation of in vitro grown oocytes



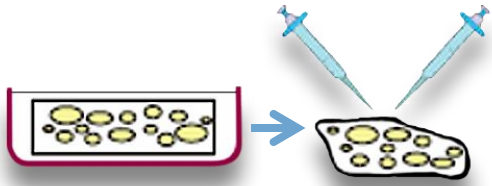
Metaphase II oocytes obtained from human IVG (19–21 days) follicles following 24 h IVM<sup>1</sup>



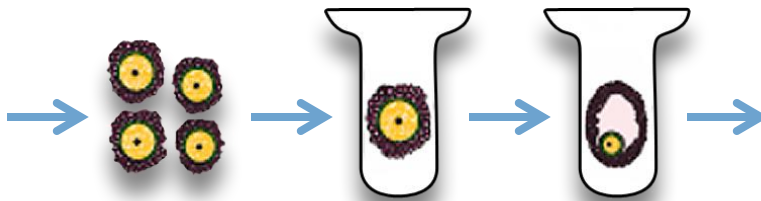
# Multi-step culture system for human oocytes<sup>1,2</sup>



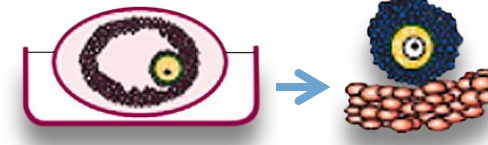
## Step 1:



## Step 2:



## Step 3:



## Step 4:



Activating growth of immature eggs from a small piece of ovary. Then isolating the growing eggs

Individual growing eggs placed with factors that support growth and development

Eggs matured in preparation for fertilisation

Fertilisation

**Approximately 30% of oocytes that complete the culture process can reach maturity (metaphase II)<sup>1</sup>**

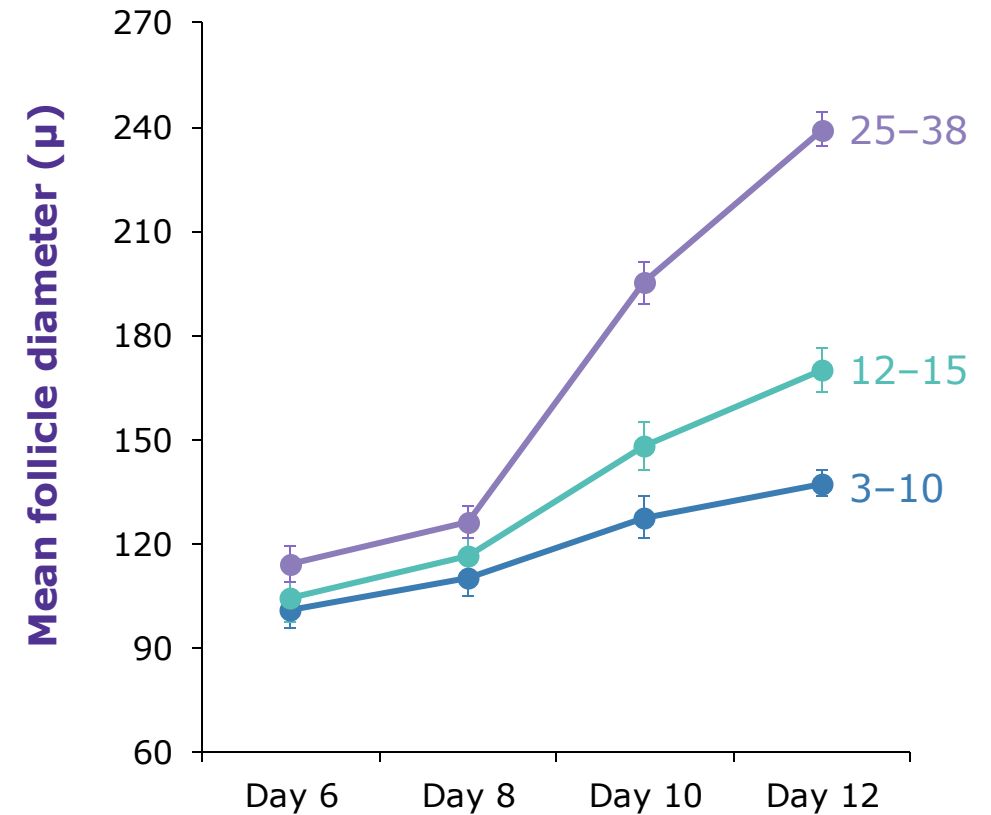
# Moving towards application: Testing a range of tissue sources



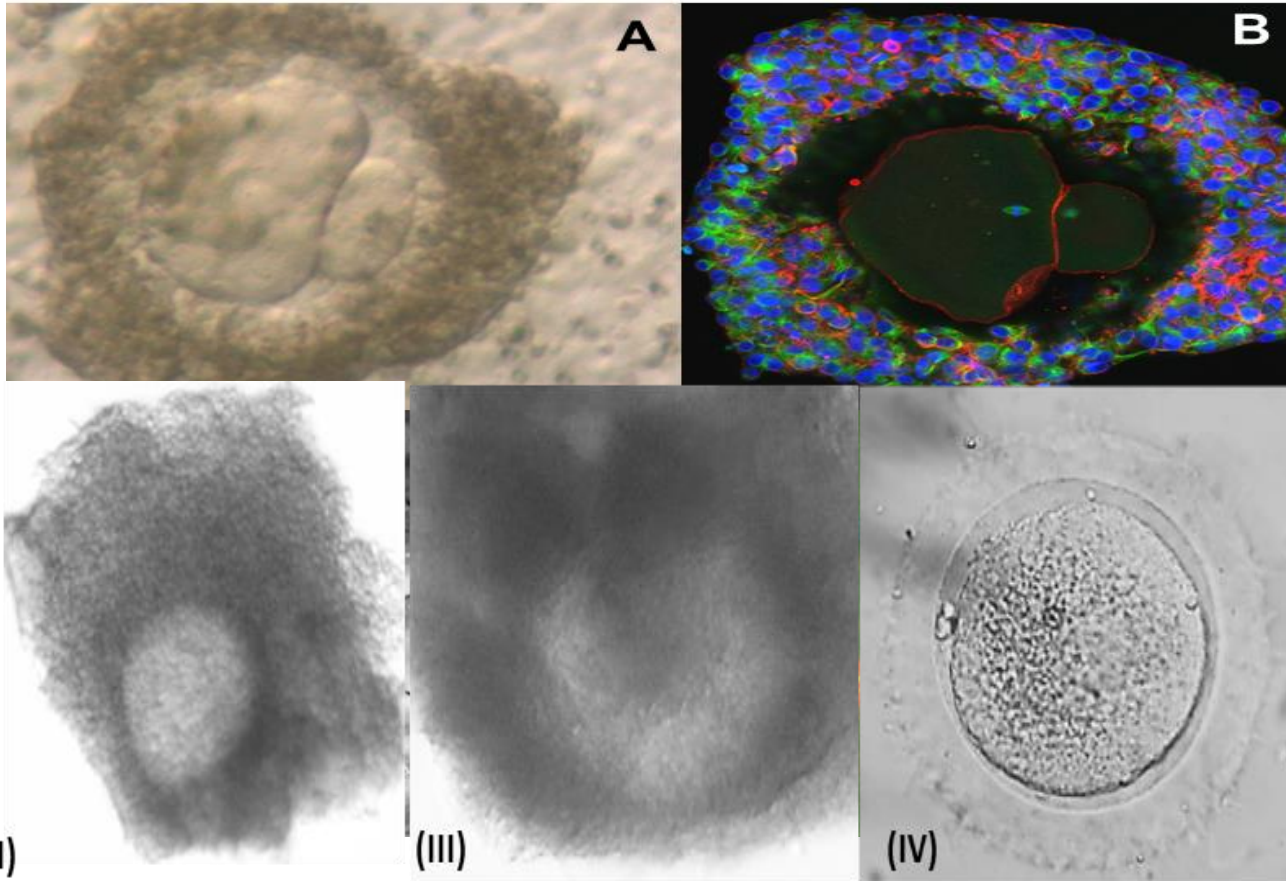
Tissue source <sup>1</sup>	Endpoint achieved: Lab-grown eggs <sup>1</sup>
Healthy women	Metaphase II oocytes (Mature eggs)
Prepubertal girls	Multilaminar stages (Midway mature)
Turner syndrome patients	Early antral (Almost mature)
Chemotherapy-treated	Variable: Depends on age and treatment
Gender reassignment	Metaphase II oocytes (Mature eggs)

**One size does not fit all:** System has to be adapted for tissue type (patient group)<sup>1</sup>

Growth rate during step 2 of culture<sup>2</sup>



# Moving towards application: Improving culture conditions



All human IVG oocytes that formed metaphase II spindles had large polar bodies<sup>1</sup>

Adapting physical conditions of the culture system: Lower oxygen tension appears to improve polar body size and spindle

# Next steps towards clinical application

Determining health and developmental competence of IVG oocytes (sequencing, epigenome, metabolome)



Fertilisation of IVG human oocytes: HFEA approval



Embryo testing



Parallel studies on a large animal model (sheep and cow) embryo testing and transfer.  
Live young

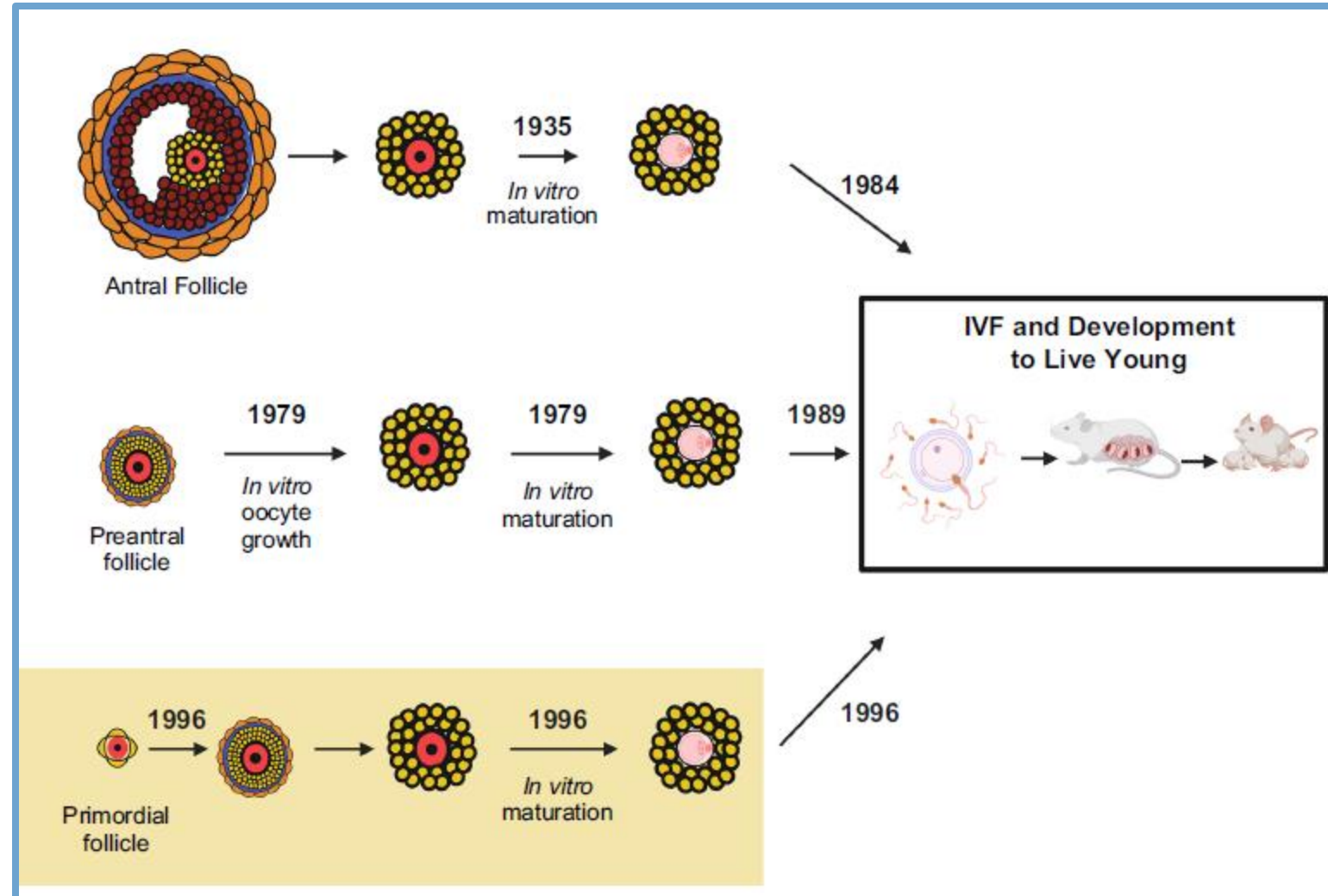


# Developing Mouse Follicle/Oocyte Culture Systems

Antral

Pre-antral

Primordial



# Human Pre-antral Follicles cultured to Metaphase II



## SCIENTIFIC REPORTS

Isolated Pre-antral follicles  
and grown in alginate can  
develop to Metaphase II

OPEN

### *In vitro* follicle growth supports human oocyte meiotic maturation

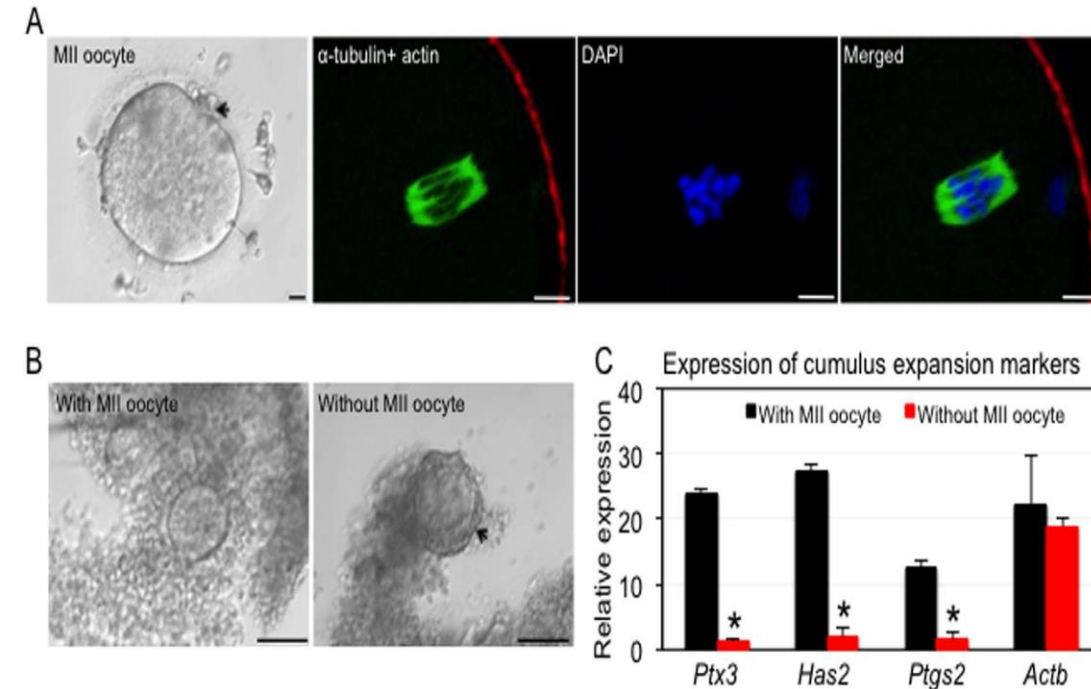
Shuo Xiao<sup>1,2</sup>, Jiyang Zhang<sup>1,3</sup>, Megan M. Romero<sup>1,2</sup>, Kristin N. Smith<sup>4</sup>, Lonnie D. Shea<sup>5</sup> & Teresa K. Woodruff<sup>1,2</sup>

Received: 17 August 2015

Accepted: 23 October 2015





Published: 27 November 2015

*In vitro* follicle growth is a potential approach to preserve fertility for young women who are facing a risk of premature ovarian failure (POF) caused by radiation or chemotherapy. Our two-step follicle culture strategy recapitulated the dynamic human follicle growth environment *in vitro*. Follicles developed from the preantral to antral stage, and, for the first time, produced meiotically competent metaphase II (MII) oocytes after *in vitro* maturation (IVM).



# Neurotrophin-4 promotes *in vitro* development and maturation of human secondary follicles yielding metaphase II oocytes and successful blastocyst formation

Human Reproduction Open, 2024,  
2024(1), hoae005  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/hropen/hoae005>

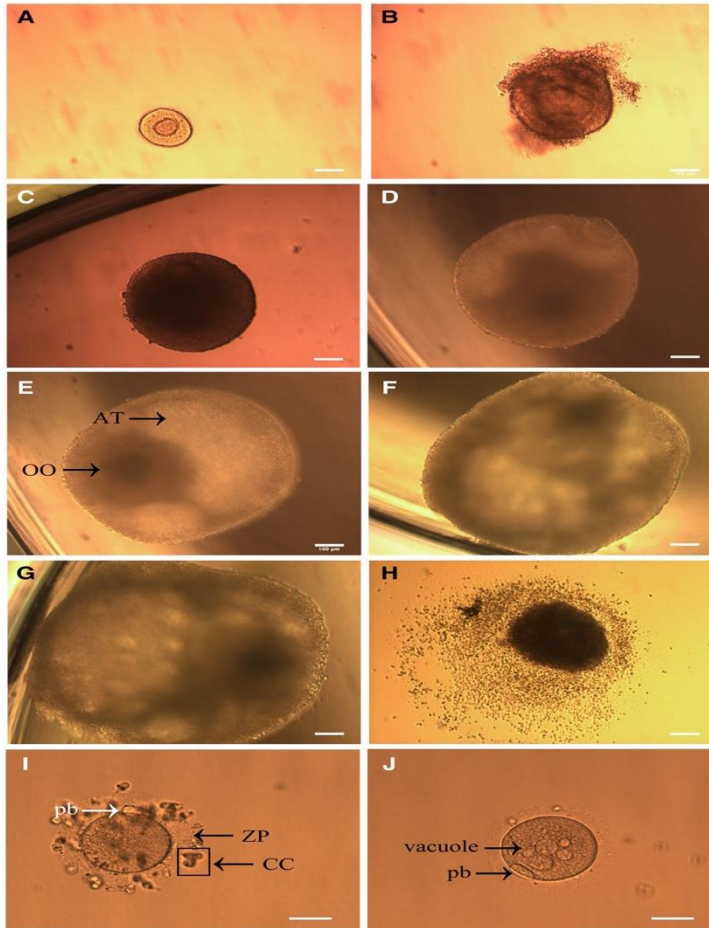
Yingchun Guo<sup>1,2</sup>, Lei Jia <sup>1,2</sup>, Haitao Zeng<sup>1,2</sup>, Peng Sun<sup>1,2</sup>, Wenlong Su<sup>1,2</sup>, Tingting Li <sup>1,2,\*†</sup>, Xiaoyan Liang <sup>1,2,\*†</sup>, and Cong Fang <sup>1,2,\*†</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Reproductive Medicine Research Center, The Sixth Affiliated Hospital, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangdong, Guangzhou, China

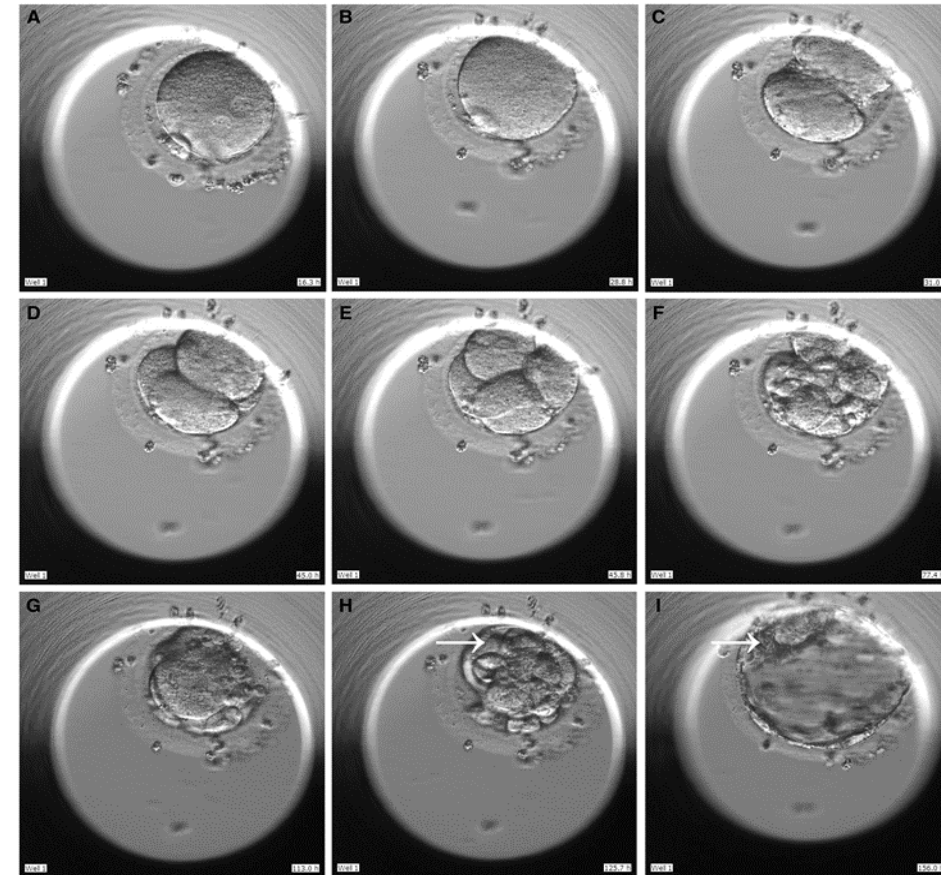
<sup>2</sup>GuangDong Engineering Technology Research Center of Fertility Preservation, Guangdong, Guangzhou, China

JIA H. PANGDONG

Follicles Isolated  
from patients  
aged 6-21 years



Human secondary follicles cultured for up to 3 weeks



Embryo development after fertilization of an oocyte harvested from human follicle cultured *in vitro* with neurotrophic factor 4 (NT4).

# Summary



Multi-step culture system supports human oocyte growth and development from primordial stages



Optimisation of each step required



Further testing required (epigenetic status)



Fertilisation potential has been shown in cultured preantral follicles next step PM



A model system for human oocyte development



# Multi-step culture system has been used to study effect of age, chemotherapy and role of signalling pathways<sup>1-12</sup>

Molecular Human Reproduction, Vol.20, No.8 pp. 736–744, 2014  
Advanced Access publication on May 15, 2014 doi:10.1093/molehr/gau037

molecular  
human  
reproduction

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

## Inhibition of phosphatase and tensin homologue (PTEN) in human ovary *in vitro* results in increased activation of primordial follicles but compromises development of growing follicles

Marie McLaughlin<sup>1,\*</sup>, Hazel L. Kinnell<sup>2</sup>, Richard A. Anderson<sup>2</sup>, and Evelyn E. Telfer<sup>1</sup>

REPRODUCTION  
RESEARCH

## Oocyte development in bovine primordial follicles is promoted by activin and FSH within a two-step serum-free culture system

J Assist Reprod Genet (2010) 27:141–147  
DOI 10.1007/s10815-010-9395-6

FERTILITY PRESERVATION

## Activin A inhibits activation of human primordial follicles *in vitro*

Chi Christina Ding • K. Joo Thong • Archie Krishna • Evelyn E. Telfer

Molecular Human Reproduction, Vol.16, No.9 pp. 644–653, 2010  
Advanced Access publication on March 4, 2010 doi:10.1093/molehr/gaq021

MHR  
Molecular Human Reproduction

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

## Activin promotes follicular integrity and oogenesis in cultured pre-antral bovine follicles

M. McLaughlin<sup>1</sup>, J.J. Bromfield<sup>2</sup>, D.F. Albertini<sup>2</sup>, and E.E. Telfer<sup>1,\*</sup>

Human Reproduction Vol.23, No.5 pp. 1151–1158, 2008  
Advance Access publication on March 6, 2008

doi:10.1093/humrep/den070

## A two-step serum-free culture system supports development of human oocytes from primordial follicles in the presence of activin

Evelyn E. Telfer<sup>1,3</sup>, Marie McLaughlin<sup>1</sup>, Christina Ding<sup>2</sup> and K. Joo Thong<sup>2</sup>

FERTILITY PRESERVATION

## mTOR kinase inhibition results in oocyte loss characterized by empty follicles in human ovarian cortical strips cultured *in vitro*

Marie McLaughlin, Ph.D.,<sup>a</sup> Pasquale Patrizio, M.D.,<sup>b</sup> Umit Kayisli, Ph.D.,<sup>b</sup> Janelle Luk, M.D.,<sup>b</sup> Travis C. Thomson, Ph.D.,<sup>c</sup> Richard A. Anderson, M.D., Ph.D.,<sup>d</sup> Evelyn E. Telfer, Ph.D.,<sup>a</sup> and Joshua Johnson, Ph.D.<sup>a</sup>

Molecular Human Reproduction, Vol.24, No.3 pp. 135–142, 2018  
Advanced Access publication on January 30, 2018 doi:10.1093/molehr/gay002

molecular  
human  
reproduction

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Metaphase II oocytes from human unilaminar follicles grown in a multi-step culture system

M. McLaughlin<sup>1</sup>, D.F. Albertini<sup>2</sup>, W.H.B. Wallace<sup>3</sup>, R.A. Anderson<sup>4</sup>, and E.E. Telfer<sup>1,\*</sup>

Reproduction  
@Fertility

E Baillie et al.

4.2

e220102

RESEARCH

## The ovaries of transgender men indicate effects of high dose testosterone on the primordial and early growing follicle pool

Emily Baillie<sup>1</sup>, Mila Maidarti<sup>1</sup>, Robert Hawthorn<sup>2</sup>, Stuart Jack<sup>3</sup>, Neale Watson<sup>4</sup>, Evelyn E Telfer<sup>1</sup> and Richard A Anderson<sup>5</sup>

OXFORD

human  
reproduction

Human Reproduction, 2024, 39(2), 382–392  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dead255>  
Advance Access Publication Date: December 9, 2023  
Original Article

Reproductive biology

## Anti-Mullerian hormone attenuates both cyclophosphamide-induced damage and PI3K signalling activation, while rapamycin attenuates only PI3K signalling activation, in human ovarian cortex *in vitro*

Roseanne Rosario<sup>1,2,\*</sup>, Hazel L. Stewart<sup>2</sup>, Norah Spears<sup>1</sup>, Evelyn E. Telfer<sup>1,3</sup>, and Richard A. Anderson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Biomedical Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

Human Reproduction, Vol.29, No.1 pp. 97–106, 2014

Advanced Access publication on October 17, 2013 doi:10.1093/humrep/det388

human  
reproduction

ORIGINAL ARTICLE Reproductive biology

## The immature human ovary shows loss of abnormal follicles and increasing follicle developmental competence through childhood and adolescence

R.A. Anderson<sup>1,\*</sup>, M. McLaughlin<sup>2</sup>, W.H.B. Wallace<sup>3</sup>, D.F. Albertini<sup>4</sup>, and E.E. Telfer<sup>2</sup>

Human Reproduction, Vol.34, No.2 pp. 297–307, 2019

Advanced Access publication on December 6, 2018 doi:10.1093/humrep/dey354

human  
reproduction

ORIGINAL ARTICLE Reproductive biology

## Inhibition of PTEN activates bovine non-growing follicles *in vitro* but increases DNA damage and reduces DNA repair response

Mila Maidarti<sup>1,2</sup>, Yvonne L. Clarkson<sup>2</sup>, Marie McLaughlin<sup>2</sup>, Richard A. Anderson<sup>1</sup>, and Evelyn E. Telfer<sup>2,\*</sup>

Human Reproduction, Vol.32, No.1 pp. 165–174, 2017

Advanced Access publication on December 5, 2016 doi:10.1093/humrep/dew260

human  
reproduction

ORIGINAL ARTICLE Reproductive biology

## Non-growing follicle density is increased following adriamycin, bleomycin, vinblastine and dacarbazine (ABVD) chemotherapy in the adult human ovary

M. McLaughlin<sup>1,2</sup>, T.W. Kelsey<sup>3</sup>, W.H.B. Wallace<sup>4</sup>, R.A. Anderson<sup>5</sup>, and E.E. Telfer<sup>1,2,\*</sup>

Human Reproduction, Vol.38, No.3, pp. 444–458, 2023

Advance Access Publication on January 31, 2023 <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dead008>

human  
reproduction

ORIGINAL ARTICLE Reproductive biology

## Spatio-temporal remodelling of the composition and architecture of the human ovarian cortical extracellular matrix during *in vitro* culture

Johanne Grosbois<sup>1,\*</sup>, Emily C. Baillie<sup>1,2</sup>, Tom W. Kelsey<sup>3</sup>, Richard A. Anderson<sup>1,2</sup>, and Evelyn E. Telfer<sup>1</sup>

Now being used to study the potential of new oocytes generated from stem cells

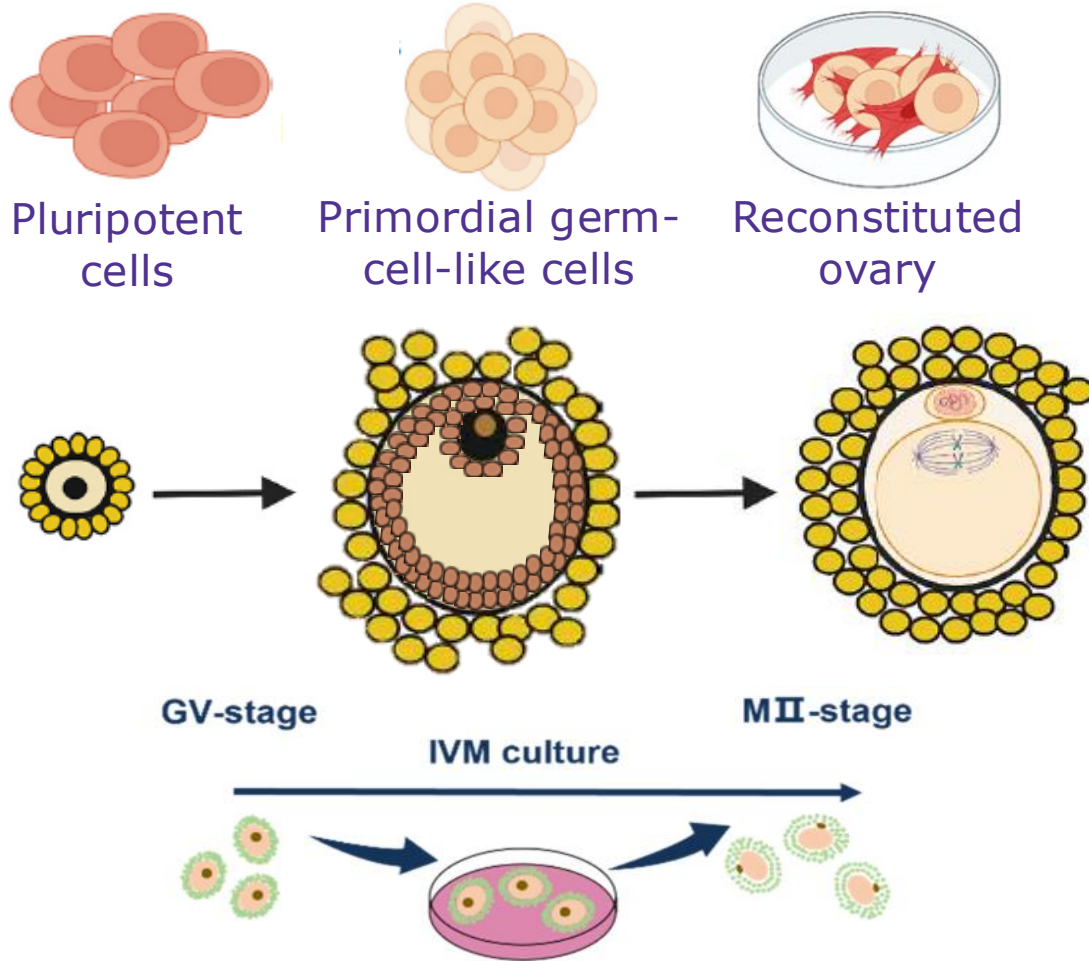


# Lab grown eggs: In vitro gametogenesis/growth

Development of immature eggs/oocytes to maturity entirely in the lab (in vitro)  
(*growing old eggs*)

Formation of new eggs/oocytes from stem cells (IVD)

# Phases to producing oocytes from stem cells



**Phase 1:** Differentiation of stem cells to germline cells and combining with somatic cells to form primordial follicles. IVD

**Phase 2:** IVG of primordial follicles to produce fully grown oocytes

**Phase 3:** IVM of IVD/IVG oocytes to reach metaphase II stage

# Oocytes have been produced entirely in vitro from somatic and germline cells derived from pluripotent stem cells



Approximately 5% of the oocytes produced by this process result in embryos and healthy pups have been produced

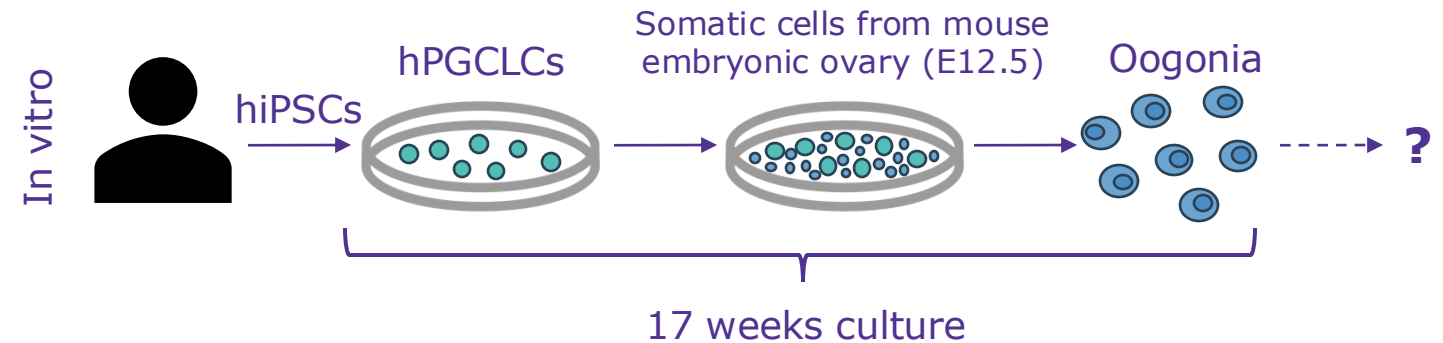
# Where are we with IVD of human oocytes?



**Phase 1:** Differentiation of stem cells to germline cells and combining with somatic cells to form primordial follicles. IVD<sup>1</sup>

## Human-induced pluripotent stem cells

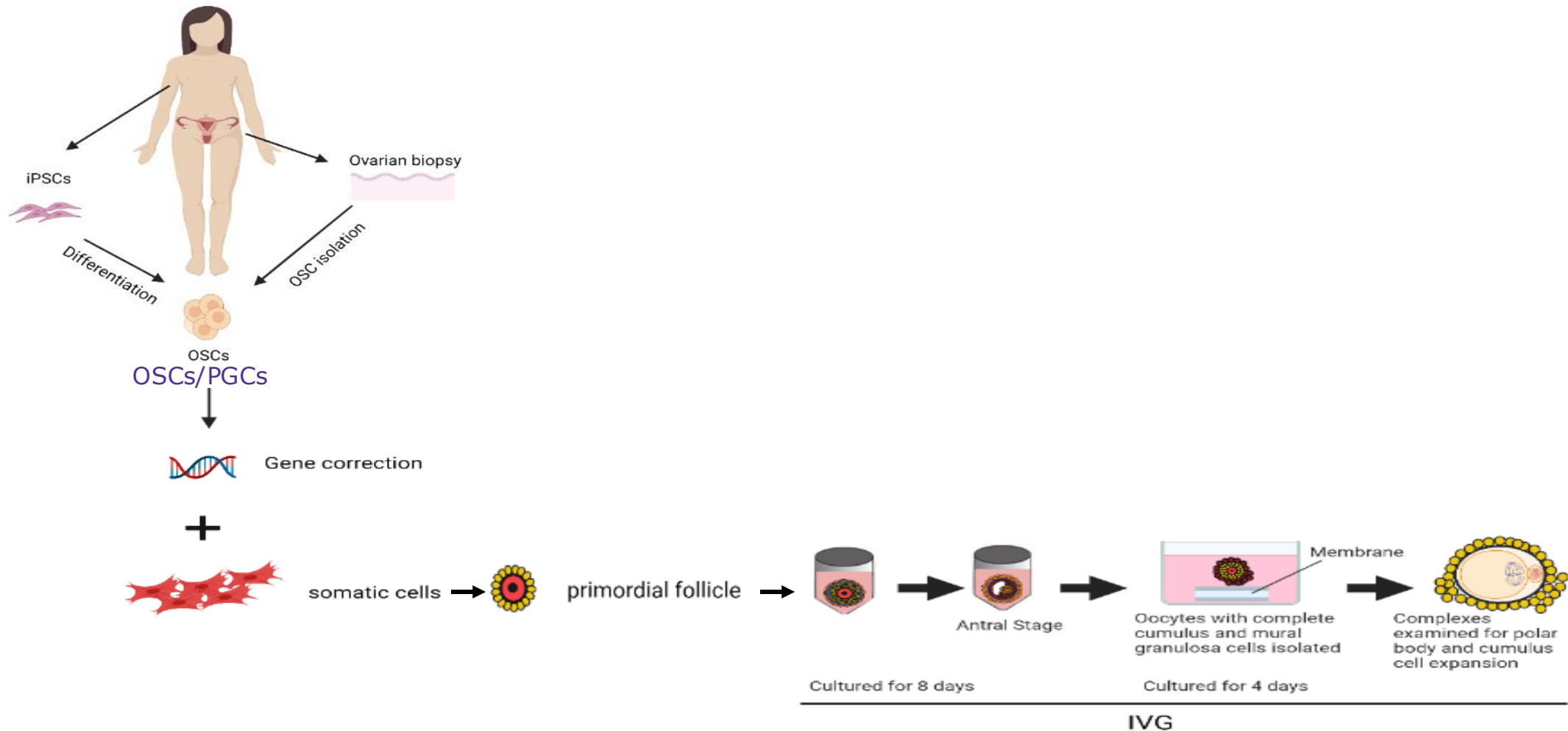
Human iPSCs have formed oogonia-like cells *in vitro*<sup>2</sup>



**Recent developments include:** Directed differentiation of human iPSCs to functional ovarian granulosa-like cells<sup>3</sup>



# Making new eggs from stem cells would reduce the need for donor eggs and open up possibility of germline editing



# Putative human oogonial stem cells isolated from ovarian tissue of adult women



## The quest for human ovarian stem cells

Evelyn E Telfer & David F Albertini

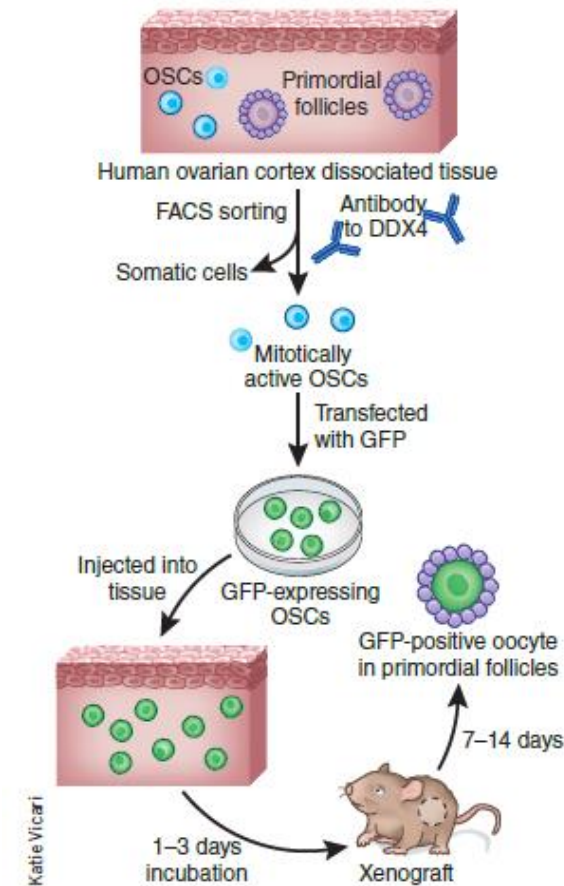
Researchers have isolated a rare population of germline stem cells from adult mouse and human ovaries that are capable of forming oocytes. The ability to harvest such cells from human ovaries could change the options available for fertility preservation and the treatment of infertility.

## White et al, 2012 Oocyte formation by mitotically-active germ cells purified from ovaries of reproductive-age women<sup>2</sup>

[*Nature Medicine*;18:412–21]

Fluorescent Activated Cell Sorting (FACS) approach

## Isolation of OSCs based on the germline marker DDX4

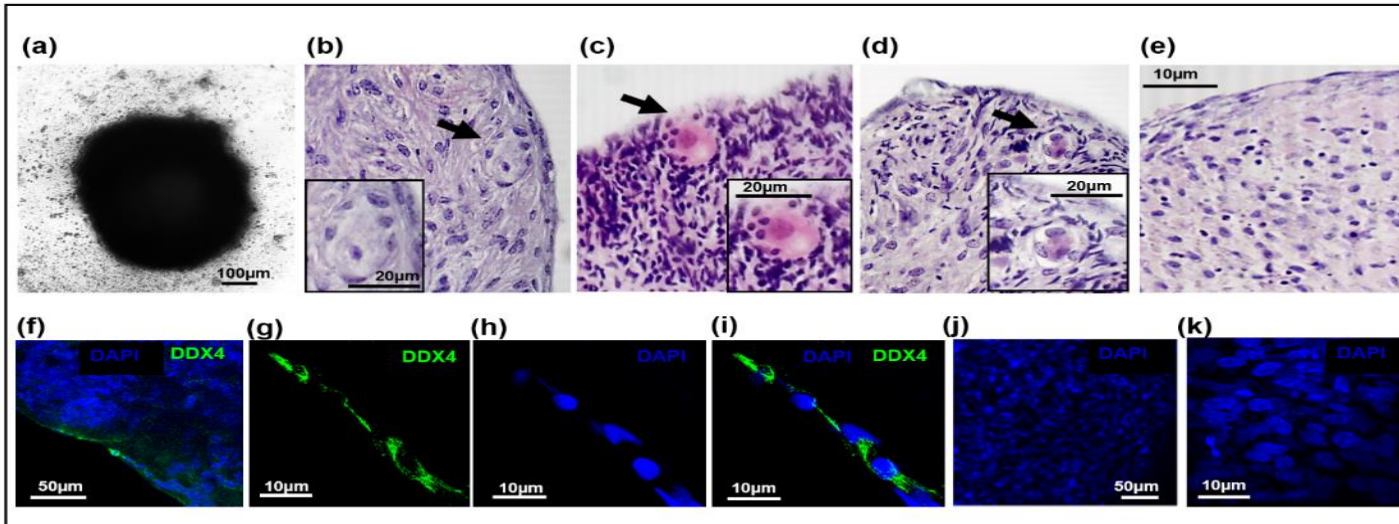


DDX4, DEAD box polypeptide 4; FACS, fluorescent activated cell sorting; GFP, green fluorescent protein; OSCs, oogonial stem cells.

Screenshot and figure taken from reference 1.

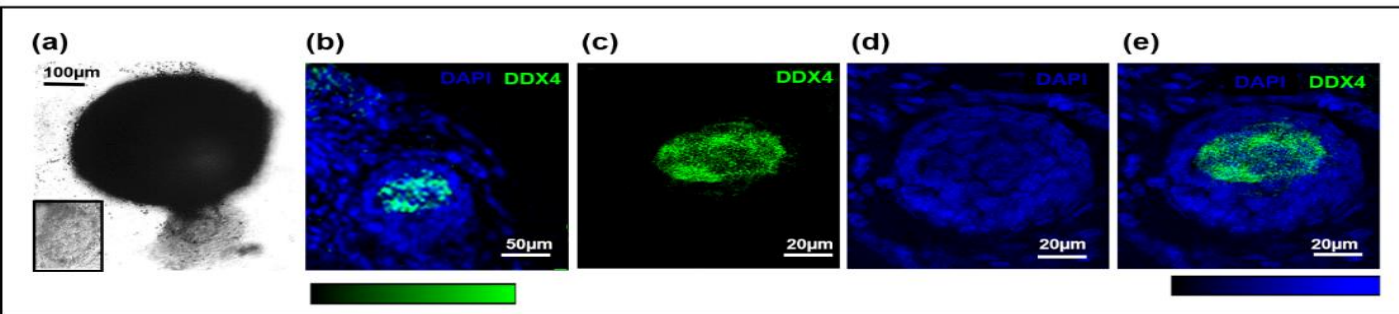
1. Telfer EE and Albertini DF. *Nat Med*. 2012;18:353–4. 2. White YA, et al. *Nat Med*. 2012;18:413–21.

# Making new human oocyte/follicle-like structures?

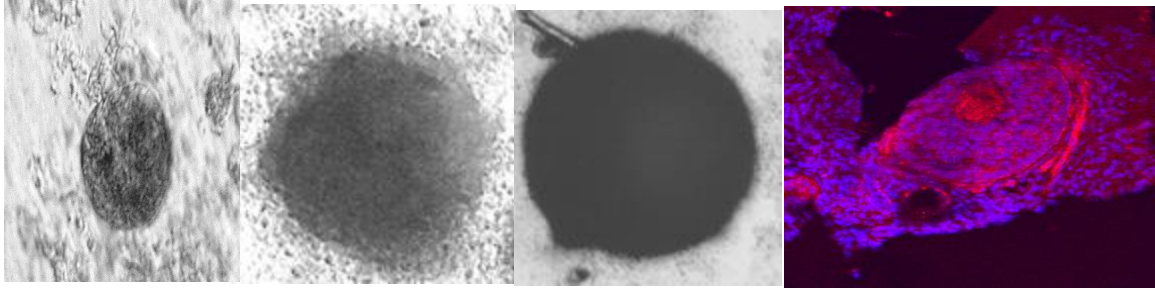


Combining DDX+ sorted cells with human foetal somatic cells results in the formation of oocyte/follicle-like structures

No structures are formed when DDX4 negative cells are combined with foetal somatic cells

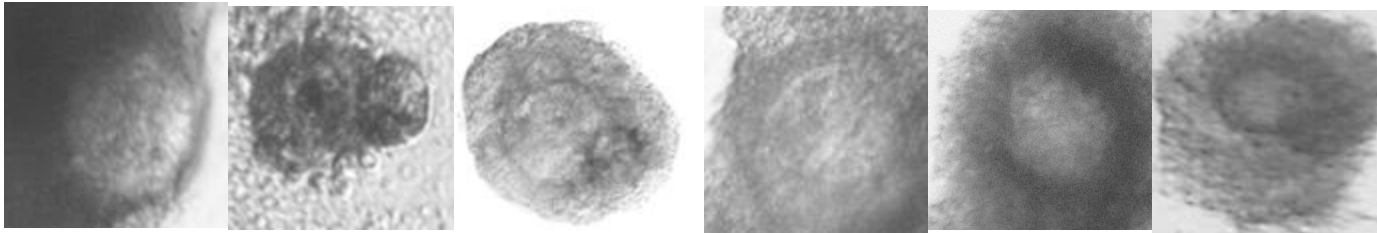


# Making new eggs from stem cells entirely in vitro



Mixing ovarian stem cells with isolated somatic cells to form mini ovaries and new eggs/follicles

Aggregates cultured for 28 days form mini ovaries



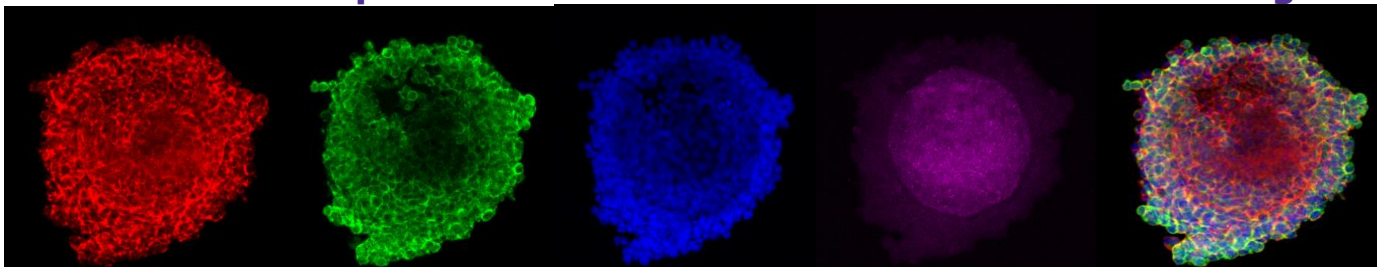
Phalloidin

$\alpha\beta$  Tubulin

DAPI

GDF9

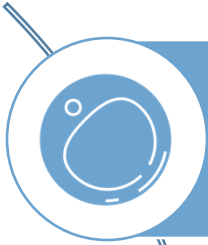
Merge



Some “new eggs” show markers that eggs within the ovary show (GDF9). Need to test their full potential and safety



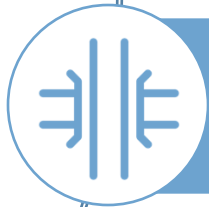
# Summary (1/2)



“Artificial” oocytes (or oocyte-like structures) can be formed from cells with germline and stem cell markers isolated from adult human ovaries (OSCs) when combined with somatic cells<sup>1</sup>



Options to produce new oocytes from ovarian cells and iPSCs: Need to define the populations of cells within the ovary and understand their in vitro and in vivo potential<sup>2</sup>

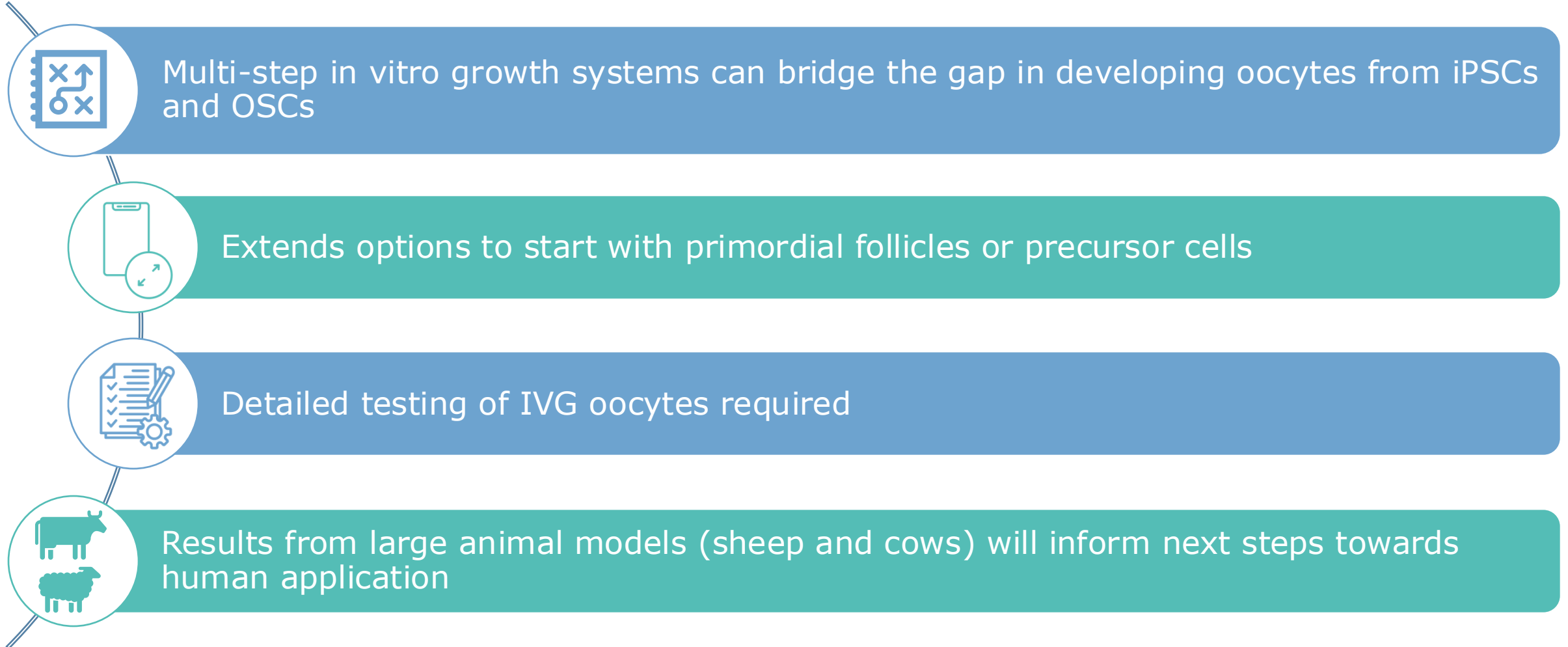


Somatic cell stem cells and in vitro growth systems can bridge the gap in developing oocytes from iPSCs<sup>2</sup>



Robust testing of human “artificial” oocytes required<sup>2</sup>

# Summary (2/2)



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**Mr Ahmed Ajlan**

**Mr John Binnie**

**Dr Cheryl Dunlop**

**Dr Kelsey Grieve**

**Dr Christina Ding**

**Dr Martin Waterfall**

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**The patients who kindly  
donate their ovarian  
tissue and the clinical  
teams that support this**

# MAKING A GOOD EGG: HUMAN OOCYTE HEALTH, AGING, AND IN VITRO DEVELOPMENT

## AUTHORS

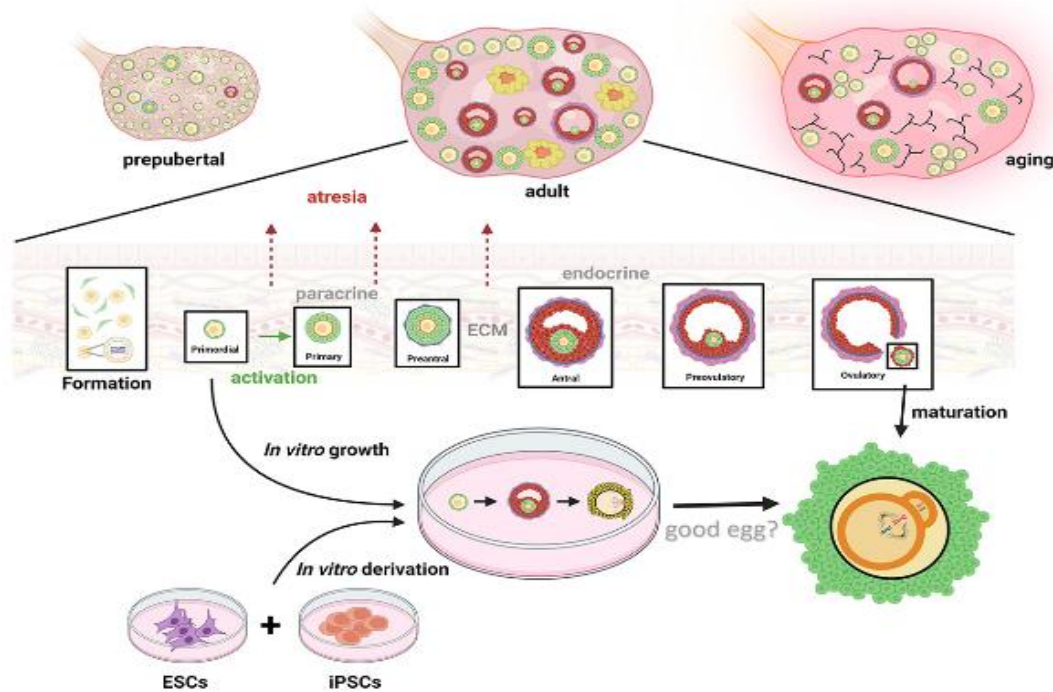
Evelyn E. Telfer, Johanne Grosbois,  
Yvonne L. Odey, Roseanne Rosario,  
Richard A. Anderson

## CORRESPONDENCE

evelyn.telfer@ed.ac.uk

## KEY WORDS

follicle culture; meiosis; oocyte maturation;  
ovary; reproductive aging; stem cells

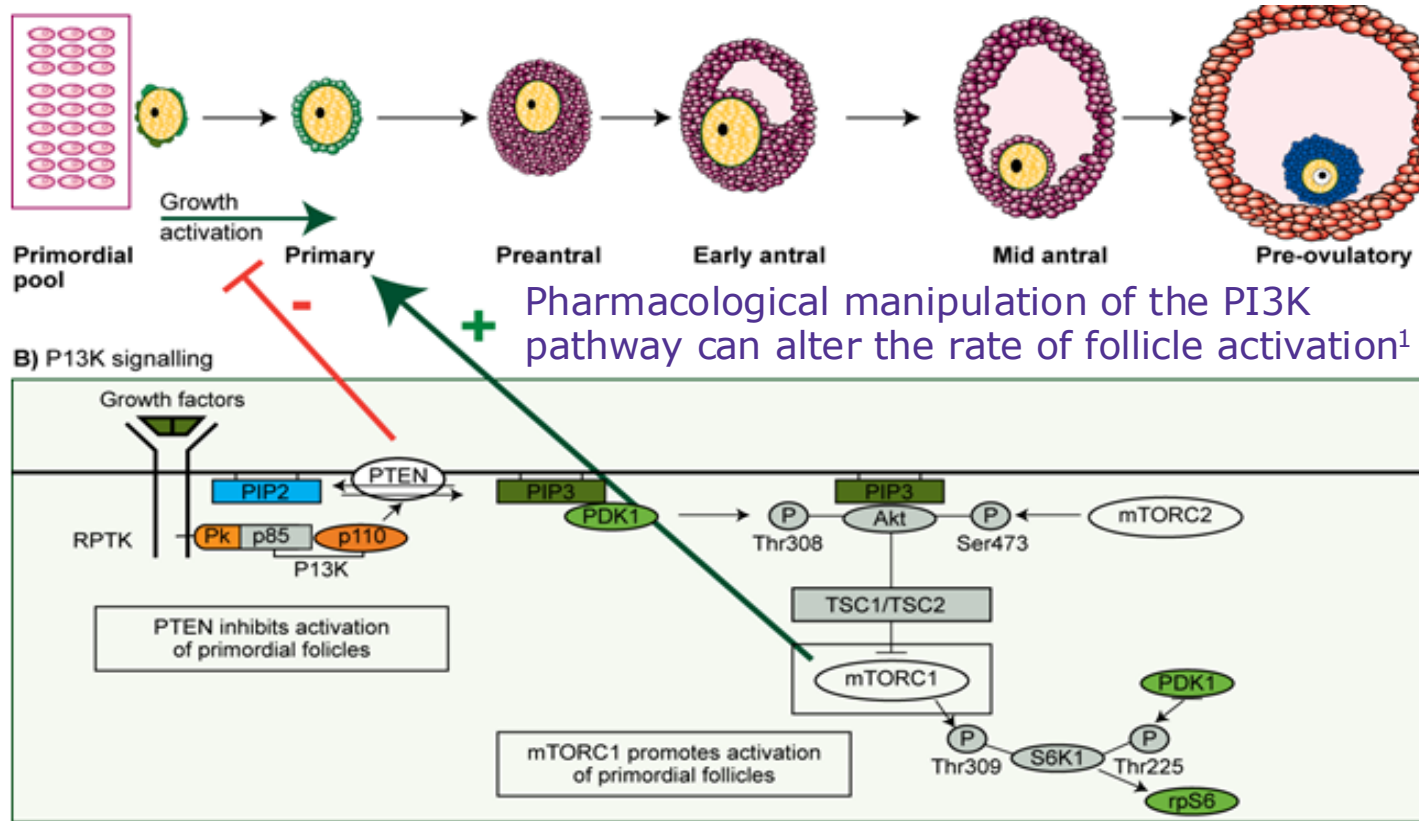




# Initiation of primordial follicle growth in vitro



## Regulation of primordial follicle activation<sup>1</sup>



Akt, protein kinase B; mTORC1, mechanistic target of rapamycin complex 1; PDK, pyruvate dehydrogenase kinase; PI3K, phosphoinositide 3-kinases; PIP2, phosphatidylinositol (4,5)-bisphosphate; PIP3, phosphatidylinositol (3,4,5)-trisphosphate; PTEN, phosphatase and tensin homolog; rpS6, ribosomal protein S6; RPTK, receptor protein tyrosine kinases; Ser, serine; Thr, threonine; TSC, tuberous sclerosis complex subunit. Figure taken from reference 1. Images of papers taken from references 2 and 3.

1. Telfer EE and Zelinski MB. *Fertil Steril*. 2013;99:1523–33. 2. McLaughlin M, et al. *Mol Hum Reprod*. 2014;20:736–44. 3. Maidarti M, et al. *Hum Reprod*. 2019;34:297–307.

*Molecular Human Reproduction*, Vol.20, No.8 pp. 736–744, 2014  
Advanced Access publication on May 15, 2014 doi:10.1093/molehr/gau037

molecular  
human  
reproduction

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

**Inhibition of phosphatase and tensin homologue (PTEN) in human ovary *in vitro* results in increased activation of primordial follicles but compromises development of growing follicles**

Marie McLaughlin<sup>1,\*</sup>, Hazel L. Kinnell<sup>2</sup>, Richard A. Anderson<sup>2</sup>, and Evelyn E. Telfer<sup>1</sup>

*Human Reproduction*, Vol.34, No.2 pp. 297–307, 2019  
Advanced Access publication on December 6, 2018 doi:10.1093/humrep/dey354

human  
reproduction

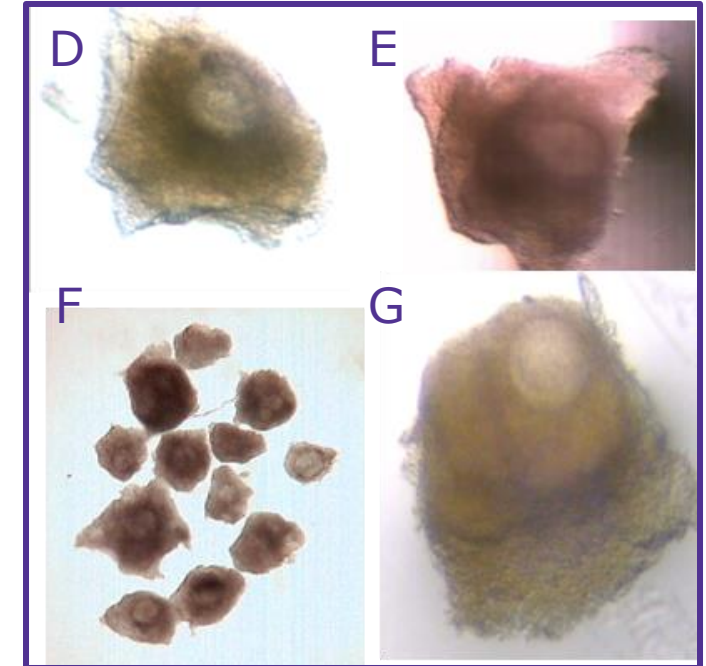
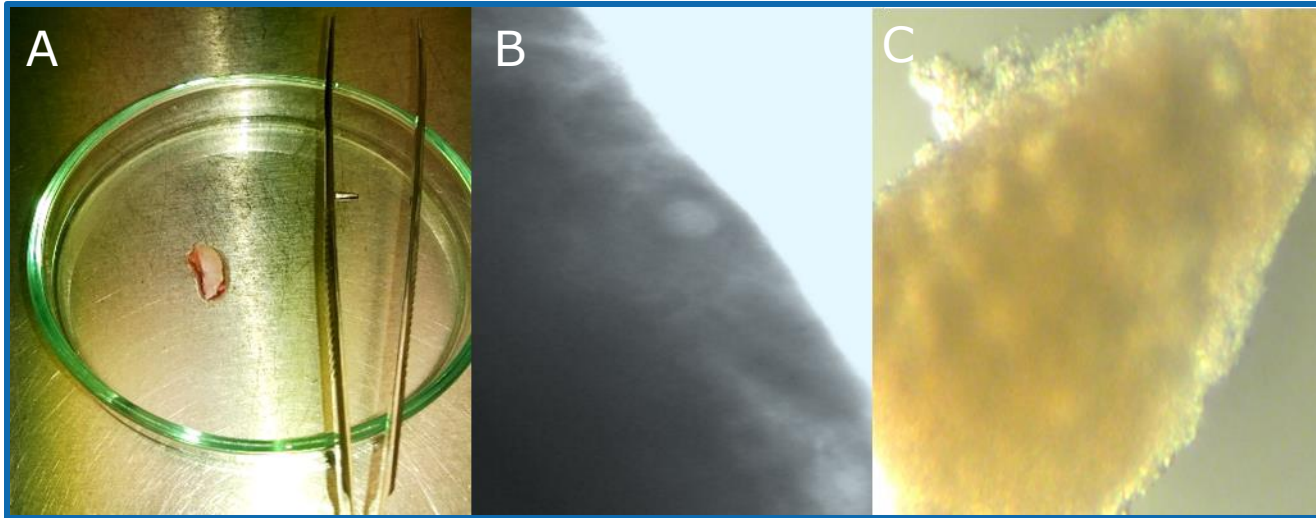
ORIGINAL ARTICLE *Reproductive biology*

**Inhibition of PTEN activates bovine non-growing follicles *in vitro* but increases DNA damage and reduces DNA repair response**

Mila Maidarti<sup>1,2</sup>, Yvonne L. Clarkson<sup>2</sup>, Marie McLaughlin<sup>2</sup>, Richard A. Anderson<sup>1</sup>, and Evelyn E. Telfer<sup>2,\*</sup>

## Safety of in vitro activation<sup>3</sup>

# Step 1: In vitro activation and growth of quiescent follicles



- Primordial follicles activate within a loose micro-cortex<sup>1</sup>
- Hippo signalling disruption (tissue architecture crucial)<sup>2</sup>
- Isolated primordial follicles do not activate in vitro<sup>2</sup>
- Optimal time and size to remove growing follicles from micro-cortex environment<sup>1,2</sup>
- 6–8 days;  $\geq 100 \mu\text{M}$  mean diameter<sup>1,2</sup>
- Prolonging step 1 results in increased death and poor-quality follicles/oocytes<sup>2</sup>