

Transcript - Podcast Number 2 - Male Fertility

Anne Howard

Hello and welcome to the Royal College of Nursing Fertility Nurse Forum podcast. My name's Anne Howard, one of the committee members, and I'm delighted to be here today with Shaun Greenaway. Shaun is the co-founder of Nexus Fertility, a platform that supports men through their fertility journeys. Have I got that right, Shaun?

Shaun Greenaway

Absolutely.

Anne Howard

Wonderful. Today we're going to talk about how we can improve care for male patients going through treatment and how to support them. By way of background, Shaun was a fertility patient himself. Shaun, could you give us a brief overview of your journey?

Shaun Greenaway

Of course. I was diagnosed with azoospermia in early 2018. I had a varicocele embolization and later a micro-TESE, both unsuccessful. My wife and I then chose to pursue parenthood using donor sperm. In February 2021, we welcomed twins into the world.

It was a rollercoaster, mostly lows, and I went through it largely alone, there weren't other men speaking openly about infertility. I decided to change that by sharing my story. Now I try to bring the male experience to light because it's been in the shadows far too long.

Anne Howard

I completely agree. Historically, men have often been the forgotten partners in fertility treatment, largely because much of the medical focus is on women. Things are improving, but we want to make sure men's voices are heard too. Shaun, what was it like for you going through fertility investigations and treatment as a male patient?

Shaun Greenaway

Shock was my first reaction. Fertility is usually framed as a women's issue, in society, in the media, even in clinics. Men often assume they'll have no problem, especially when we see older male celebrities fathering children. I was one of those men who took it for granted.

When our tests came back showing zero sperm, I went into denial. Later results confirmed it. Even though I was the reason we were there as a couple, I often felt like the partner on the sidelines. Some of that was me, sitting there in shock, but from the very start I felt overlooked.

Anne Howard

So you often felt overlooked. Did that feeling continue throughout treatment?

Shaun Greenaway

Yes. For example, when we reached the clinic stage, my wife was assigned a five-digit patient number. Mine was the same number with a "P" for partner. I was the cause of the issue, yet still defined as "partner." It was subtle but symbolic. Too often men are assumed not to engage. That assumption itself keeps us on the margins.

Anne Howard

What would have made you feel more included and supported?

Shaun Greenaway

Simple things: look at me, make eye contact, ask how I'm feeling, check if I understand. Use plain language, not medical jargon, explain it to me like I'm five. When patients leave with more questions than answers, they turn to unregulated spaces online, which can be dangerous.

Anne Howard

Exactly. That sense of being out of control affects both men and women in treatment. But men may internalise it more, which can impact mental health later on.

Shaun Greenaway

Yes, it builds like a pressure cooker. Men are used to solving problems; when fertility is taken out of our control, we can feel lost. Without healthy outlets, those feelings can escape in unhealthy ways.

Anne Howard

And for men there's often a stigma attached to infertility. Do you think we should be more mindful of that?

Shaun Greenaway

Definitely. Assume from the start that a man is feeling ashamed and alone. Many men don't seek support immediately. Even giving a semen sample is a deeply uncomfortable experience. Any jokes you hear usually mask embarrassment, not confidence.

Anne Howard

Yes, and sadly those "one job" comments still get made, which only add to the stigma. We need to treat men as equal partners in the process. So Shaun, if you could give fertility nurses one piece of advice when working with male patients, what would it be?

Shaun Greenaway

Acknowledge them. Even a simple "I know this is hard, and we're rooting for you" can make a difference. Don't feel pressured to fill every silence, sometimes just being present matters. Small gestures of kindness are remembered for years.

Anne Howard

That's why it's vital for nurses to include men in conversations. We're often the first point of contact, and the support we provide can make a stressful process easier.

Shaun Greenaway

Absolutely. Patients remember you long after treatment. Those small, kind interactions are life-changing.

Anne Howard

And alongside emotional support, nurses should educate themselves on the physical aspects too. For example, understanding semen analysis results. I'll do a shameless plug for the RCN Male Factor Fertility document, it's a really useful resource.

Shaun Greenaway

You should plug it, it's excellent. Nurses explaining results clearly is so important. I once had an admin staff member phone me about azoospermia, stumble over the word, and admit they didn't know what it meant. That left me turning to Google.

Anne Howard

Exactly, and that only adds to anxiety. Patients need clear explanations at that crucial moment.

Shaun Greenaway

It still happens. I know men told they had azoospermia, yet their results were described as "suboptimal." Zero sperm isn't suboptimal, it's zero. That kind of language is devastating.

Anne Howard

So nurses need both emotional awareness and a basic understanding of the physical aspects. And we also need to signpost to support. Shaun, could you tell us about the groups Nexus runs?

Shaun Greenaway

Yes. NexusFertility.com is free for men. We run online and in-person support groups, plus a 24/7 WhatsApp group with over 100 men at different stages of treatment. Some are starting out, some are in the two-week wait, others have used donor sperm, and some are on the other side. Sometimes it's not about asking questions but just having a safe space to vent. Men can participate however they feel comfortable.

Anne Howard

That's amazing. When I first started fertility nursing, nothing like that existed for men. Your work is invaluable.

Shaun Greenaway

Thanks. Our first in-person meet was on 15th July, men showed up with just a few days' notice. Being face-to-face is powerful. We're now expanding regionally across the UK.

Anne Howard

It's so important that nurses know about these resources so we can signpost patients.

Shaun Greenaway

Yes, and one more point: men may struggle to open up to female professionals because they fear judgment. Of course that isn't true, but in the moment they feel it. Just being aware of that dynamic helps.

Anne Howard

Before we close, Shaun, you asked your community if they had any messages for nurses. Could you share some?

Shaun Greenaway

Sure. One man said the sample room felt awful, but the nurse wished him luck and encouraged questions, that mattered. Another appreciated nurses splitting their focus between him and his partner. Small touches like eye contact on egg collection day made him

feel included. Others mentioned how compassionate nurses were during miscarriage care. Overall, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, men remember the kindness.

Anne Howard

That's wonderful to hear. It shows that many nurses are already doing the right things, and it reaffirms the importance of including men throughout treatment.

Shaun Greenaway

Exactly. Patients really do appreciate you, even if they don't always say it. Those interactions matter.

Anne Howard

That's such an important message. Shaun, thank you so much for sharing your story and for creating this community. It's going to continue to grow and provide crucial support for men.

Shaun Greenaway

Thank you. I feel like this is just the start, there's so much more to be done.

Anne Howard

Amazing to have you here. Please listen to our other podcasts and share any feedback. Goodbye.