

Considering multifetal pregnancy reduction: the emotional impact on biological fathers

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Objective

Multifetal pregnancy reduction (MFPR) is a medical procedure with the purpose to reduce the number of fetuses to improve chances of a healthy outcome for both the mother and remaining fetuses. Psychological aspects of the decision to or not to perform MFPR has been rarely investigated. Furthermore, the impact on biological fathers is unknown. Therefore, the objective of this study is to assess the decision-making process and psychological impact of MFPR in biological fathers.

Methods

Descriptive, qualitative study using semi-structured in-depth interviews with biological fathers either after MFPR from triplet to twin or singleton pregnancy or ongoing triplet pregnancies between October 12, 2021 and February 22, 2023. Thematic analysis was used to identify trends in the father's data.

Results

Interviews were held one to six years after the decision to or not to perform MFPR. Data saturation was achieved after twelve interviews with four participants (33%) after MFPR and eight (67%) after an ongoing triplet pregnancy. Five main themes were identified: 1) the moment of establishing the triplet pregnancy, 2) the counseling and care, 3) factors that play a role in the decision-making process, 4) consequences of the decision and 5) advice for future parents. In terms of psychological consequences, this study found that fathers after MFPR often struggled with difficult emotions towards the decision; some expressed feelings of doubt or regret, and were still processing these emotions. Several fathers after an ongoing triplet had experienced a period of severe stress in the first years after the pregnancy, with major consequences for their mental health. Help in emotional processing was not offered to any of the fathers after the decision or delivery.

Conclusion

For biological fathers the decision whether to maintain or reduce a multifetal pregnancy is complex, in which medical, psychological but mainly social factors play an important role. In terms of consequences, particularly the psychological impact of the decision is extensive. Caregivers should be more aware of the psychological consequences of MFPR in fathers; a guided trajectory can help to optimize the decision-making process of MFPR as well as offering appropriate care thereafter. Further research and interventions are warranted to develop evidence-based strategies for providing effective psychological support to parents facing multifetal pregnancies.