

# I carried baby for my cancer victim sister

**A doctor has warned the NHS is denying patients the chance to have a baby – but it can be done. Two siblings explain how**

**Sarah-Kate Templeton** Health Editor

When Amy Harper was diagnosed with cancer, her first question was not about her chances of survival. It was whether she would be able to have children.

Now she has spoken of her joy at becoming a mother after her sister acted as a surrogate.

Harper was about to celebrate her first wedding anniversary and was planning to start a family with her husband, Matthew, when she was diagnosed with cervical cancer in her twenties.

The news that was most devastating to her was that the radiotherapy and chemotherapy needed to keep her alive would leave her infertile. To preserve fertility is possible, but for the vast majority of women diagnosed with cancer it cannot be done on the NHS.

Harper, now 32, said: "What hit me more than the cancer was the infertility. I asked, 'Will I be able to have children?' The doctor just shook his head and said no. At that point I broke down.

"I thought, you can get over cancer,

but losing fertility, to me that was a lot. It is from being little and playing with dolls and growing up thinking you are going to be a mum. I was distraught and begged them to do something."

Harper was referred to Dr Cheryl Fitzgerald, a consultant in reproductive medicine at St Mary's Hospital in Manchester, part of the Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Three days after being diagnosed, she started fertility treatment to remove her eggs, have in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and freeze her embryos until she was well enough to use them.

Knowing she had embryos in storage gave her the motivation to undergo the gruelling therapy.

"It was so difficult going for radiotherapy and lying on that table, listening to the machine start up, knowing that it is causing you not to have any children," said Harper, a family support worker.

Help came from her older sister, Ella Wootten, who volunteered to carry a baby for her. Wootten, now 41 but then in her mid-thirties, already had two children and was not planning to have more.

Wootten, a radiographer, said: "I didn't think twice about being a surrogate. When Amy became ill and was lucky enough to be able to have embryo collection, I felt that it was the next step for me to 'cook those babies'.

"I was just so desperately sad that Amy wouldn't be pregnant. It really hurt that

ADRIAN SHERRATT



**Ella Wootten, right, became a surrogate for sister and cancer patient Amy Harper, carrying her son Daniel, now 3**

Amy would miss that, so being able to be her 'tummy' was allowing her and Matthew to get some of that experience."

Harper went shopping for maternity clothes with her sister and attended all the antenatal appointments.

Her son Daniel, 3, was born in July 2013, and she was first to hold him.

"He came straight to me and it was just a magical moment," she said. "I was just so grateful. It comes from absolute love for a sibling."

Harper said Daniel has a very strong bond with her sister, adding: "Daniel will say, 'I come from Auntie Ella's tummy. Mummy's tummy wasn't strong enough.'"

Research by Fitzgerald and her colleagues in Manchester shows that only about one in 10 women having cancer treatment that damages fertility are able to freeze eggs or embryos on the NHS.

Fitzgerald said: "There are so many patients like Amy – young women facing not only difficult cancer treatment but additionally the news that they will not be able to have a family in the future.

"We know that we can successfully store eggs and embryos to enable these women to have a baby after they have recovered. However, it is clear the provision of these services is very patchy."

She called for fertility services to be considered 'an integral part of cancer treatment to enable all women to have the same opportunity.