

## BACKGROUND

Historically, there have been gender disparities in the medical field. Women were denied entry to UK medical schools until the late nineteenth century. Since the 1970s, when institutions began to admit students based on their academic potential and exam results, the proportion of women entering UK medical schools began to increase rapidly<sup>1</sup>.

Women now make up 59% of medical students and 46% of doctors in the UK<sup>2</sup>. The shift in gender composition of the medical workforce emphasises the need for employers to evolve and offer support for the challenges that women face to help them thrive in the workplace.

Research shows that women working as physicians and surgeons who wish to pursue a family life and motherhood face challenges including a higher risk of infertility, miscarriage and pregnancy complications<sup>3,4</sup>.

Organisations should be supporting employees through baby loss, fertility treatments, pregnancy and family life. We believe there is a need for events where women can be empowered with the facts and knowledge they require to make informed decisions about working in the NHS alongside starting and having a family.

In this study, we focus on fertility, family planning, family life and flexible working but recognise there is also a need to explore how organisations can support women in other aspects, such as during menstruation and the menopause.

## THE EVENT

The Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust (SWBH) Women's Clinician Network (WCN) organised a free half-day event "Navigating the NHS and Having a Family". The event was open to all doctors of any gender, grade and specialty and comprised of presentations covering:

- Family Leave entitlements under the NHS scheme** - The SWBH Human Resources Department covered topics such as maternity and paternity leave, shared parental leave and adoption leave.
- Less Than Full Time (LTFT) training** - Eligibility criteria, application process and further considerations.
- Personal experiences** - Male and female doctors gave talks and shared their personal experiences of working in the NHS whilst beginning or raising a family.
- Q&A** - The event closed with an open forum for Q&A with participants also being encouraged to share their own ideas and questions throughout the event.

Attendees were asked to complete a confidential pre-course and post-course survey circulated via email. The post-event survey was also made accessible on the day via QR code. We collected data on attendees' understanding with yes and no questions and opinions with free text boxes generating qualitative data.

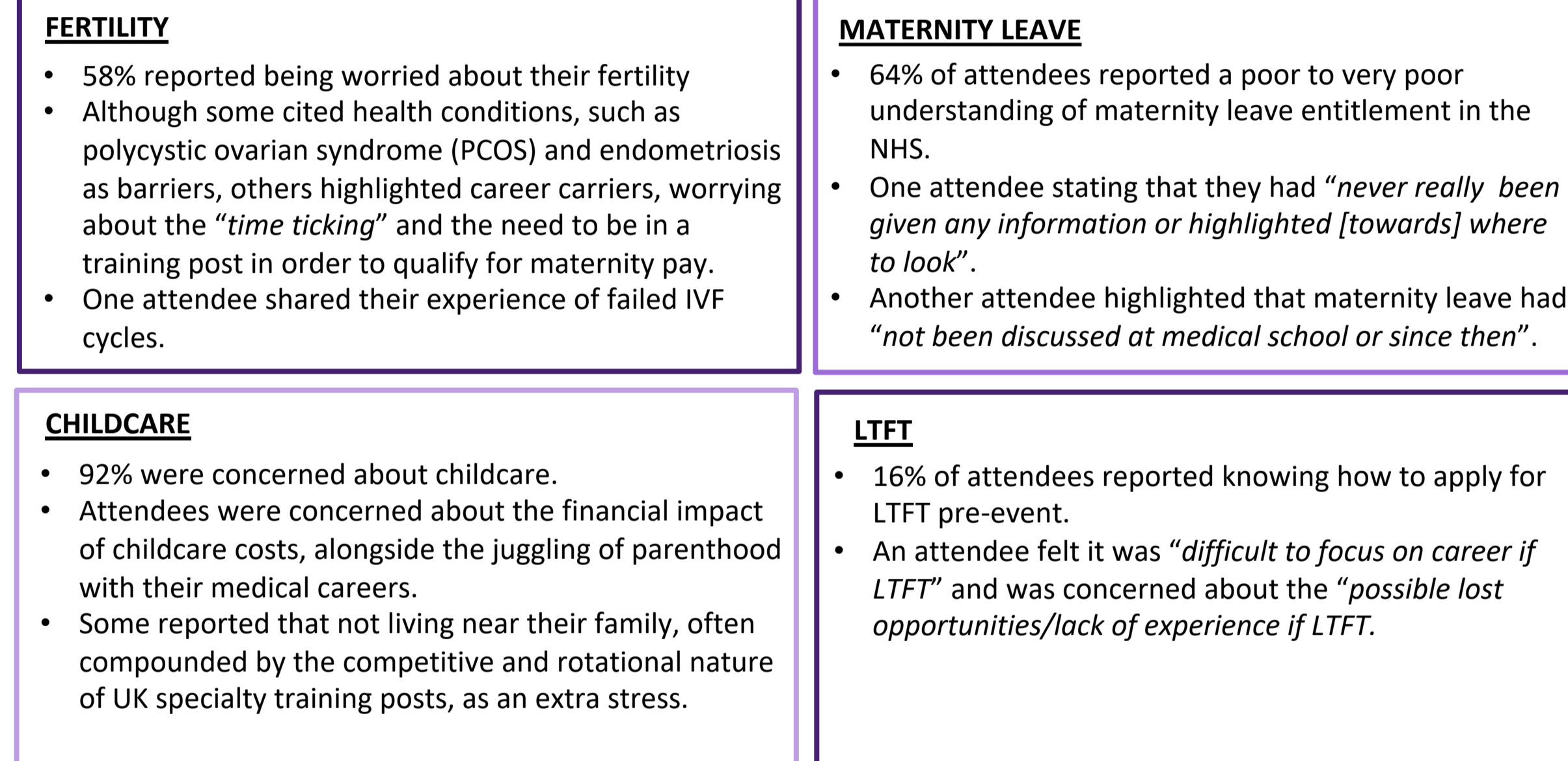
## RESULTS

Twenty-seven doctors attended the event. The grades of attendees ranged from Foundation Year 1 to Consultant, with the majority at Registrar level (32%). Attendees were from a range of specialties, with those working in medical specialties (55%) comprising the majority of participants. The mean age of attendees was 28.5 years.

### Pre-Event

In the pre-event survey participants were asked what they hoped to get out of the event. Responses reflected the desire for practical information on how to apply for maternity leave and pay, support and return to work, LTFT training and hearing personal experiences. Our results show that pre-event knowledge around maternity leave entitlements and LTFT training was poor. Our results also show there were concerns regarding fertility and childcare (Diagram 1).

DIAGRAM 1: Data and anonymous free text comments from attendees collected pre-event



We also asked participants before the event if they felt it was possible to have both a great career and a family, with 25% of attendees feeling that both were possible. Some of the reasons given for this view are outlined in Box 1. Other work-related factors reported as being barriers to this concept were relocation requirements, antisocial hours and stress.

BOX 1: Anonymous free text comments from attendees when asked why felt they could not have a great career and a family (collected pre-event)

- "Life feels busy enough as it is already – can't imagine juggling family also!"
- "Difficult to balance both and give full effort to both"
- "It involves sacrifices in when you decide to have children e.g. after training, what specialty you end up pursuing...the trainees/consultants I saw that were happy in their careers either had no kids or something had to give"
- "I have had comments to no end about being a woman in cardiology...one girl told me when she told her ES she was pregnant he just stared at her for an awkwardly long period then said "I don't know what to say to you". I am constantly told about all the sacrifices people have to make it in this job. To be honest, I'm not willing to make more personal life sacrifices and would take career insult over allowing career to dominate my life, as long as I can pay my bills and be good at my job, my days of dreaming of being a 'game changer' are long gone"
- "The amount of time that seems to go into being a very successful clinician does not feel like it can go hand in hand with a happy and fulfilling family life"



### Post-Event

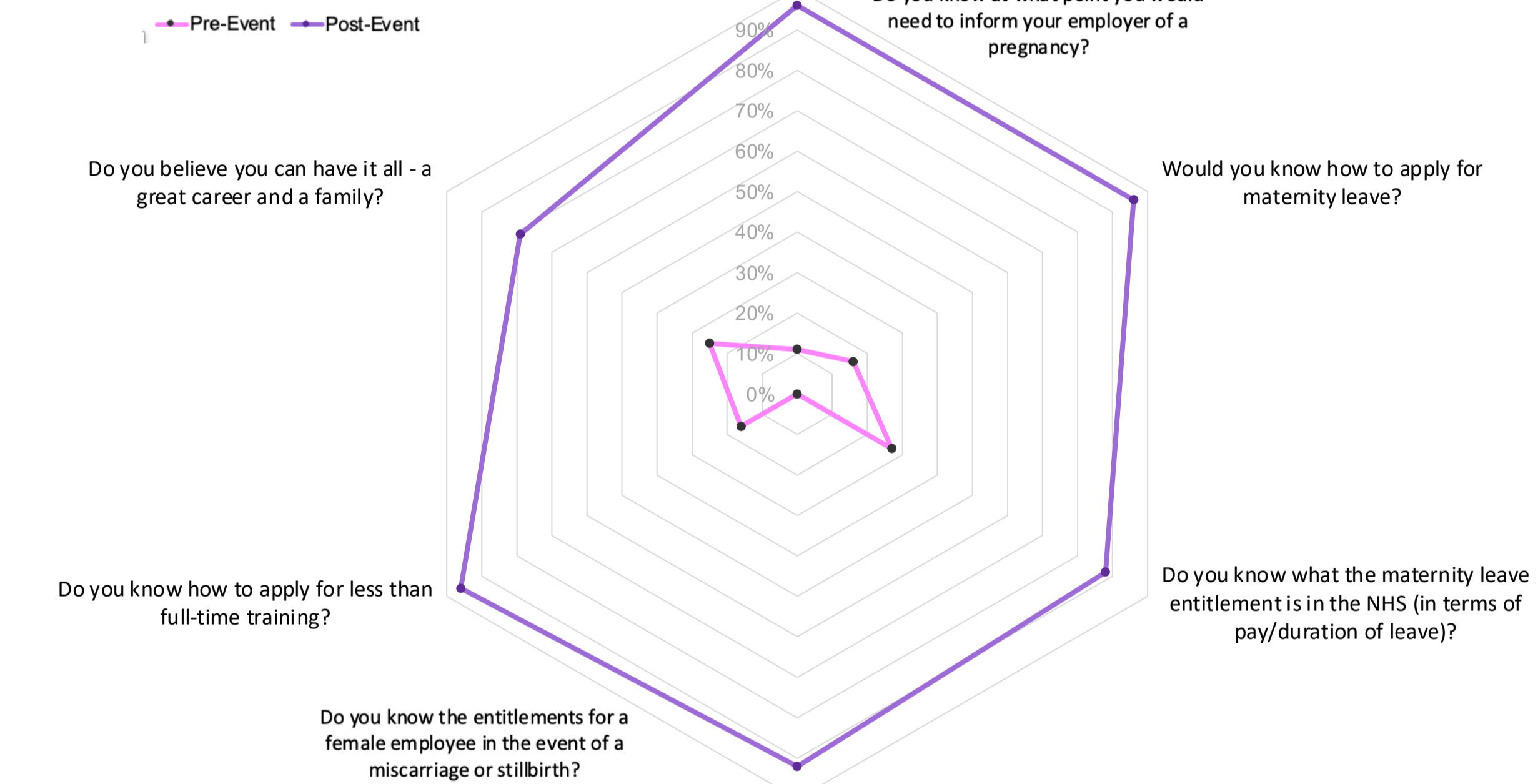
Our results show a significant improvement in the attendees understanding and knowledge around maternity leave entitlements and LTFT after attending our event (Table 1 and Graph 1).

Attendee feedback showed that they felt it "really inspiring to see women in medicine who have successfully managed career with family life" and "that it was great to see women in positions of leadership, particularly from ethnic minority groups, who are mothers – it shows you can balance it".

TABLE 1: Improvement in knowledge post-event

Question	% answering yes	
	Pre-Event	Post-Event
Do you know at what point you would need to inform your employer of a pregnancy?	11%	96%
Would you know how to apply for maternity leave?	16%	96%
Do you know what the maternity leave entitlement is in the NHS?	27%	88%
Do you know the entitlements for a female employee in the event of a miscarriage or stillbirth?	0%	92%
Do you know how to apply for less than full-time training?	16%	96%
Do you believe you can have it all - a great career and a family?	25%	79%

GRAPH 1: Change in knowledge post-event



## KEY FINDINGS

- There is a lack of information being disseminated amongst doctors in a formal manner, resulting in:
  - Concerns regarding fertility – due to age, health conditions and career goals
  - Poor understanding about maternity leave – such as when to inform employers and the entitlements in the NHS
  - Childcare concerns – the financial impact of childcare costs, juggling parenthood with their careers, and not living near their family which is often compounded by the competitive and rotational nature of UK specialty training
  - Poor understanding amongst training on how to apply for LTFT training
  - The minority of trainees feeling that they can have both a great career and a family
- Our results show that our half-day event was successful in increasing attendees' knowledge and understanding in these topics, as well as changing perceptions on whether having both a great career and a family is possible

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Education is key to changing perceptions and empowerment – integrating accessible and insightful events, such as this, into Trust inductions and the medical school curriculum, will help empower women to make informed decisions
- We need continued work to provide colleagues with information and knowledge of what support and help is available to them so they can navigate their career and not miss out due to ignorance of the system and themselves
- Female role models are needed – they are crucial for changing perceptions for future generations
- These subjects need to be talked about on a normal day to day basis
- This style of event could be extended to encompass other topics such as menstruation and the menopause

## REFERENCES

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