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'Sterilised' women sue for shock pregnancies

By **BEN HILLS**

Hundreds of Australian women who believe they have been sterilised are at risk of becoming pregnant because of a defective device used in the operation.

More than 20 supposedly sterile women in NSW, Queensland and Western Australia are known to have become pregnant. Some have had abortions and others have had babies, including one woman who had twins and another whose child was born with unrelated brain damage.

In one "cluster" of pregnancies, nearly 10 per cent of women who had sterilisation operations at Newcastle's John Hunter Hospital became pregnant. This is 40 times the claimed "normal" failure rate for the operation of 2.7 pregnancies per 1,000 women.

Health departments in most States, including NSW, have made no public announcement and have not

notified the women that they may be at risk of pregnancy, even though the problem was detected nearly two years ago.

The problem is with a tiny plastic device called a Filshie clip which is clamped on a woman's fallopian tubes during "keyhole surgery" to prevent ovulation and pregnancy. The applicator used to attach the clips, a device that works like a pair of pliers, does not close properly unless it is serviced regularly, and the clips can fall off.

Filshie clips are one of the most popular methods of sterilisation world-wide, and more than 270,000 Australian women have had them fitted since they were first marketed here in the 1980s.

Since doctors at John Hunter Hospital discovered in 1997 that they had been using defective applicators, eight of 162 women who had the operation there have become pregnant. Pregnancies have also occurred among women "sterilised" at the Geraldton Regional Hospi-

tal in WA, the Royal Women's Hospital in Brisbane, and at Westmead and Mona Vale hospitals in Sydney.

The Sydney law firm Cashman and Partners this month filed a class action claim in the Federal Court seeking damages for a Pendle Hill woman, Ms Kerrie Bright, who became pregnant six months after having a sterilisation operation at Westmead.

She is suing the manufacturer, Femcare Ltd of England, and the Australian distributor, Endovasive Pty Ltd.

Ms Bright, 35, said she decided on the operation early last year because she had three children and was planning to train for a job to supplement the income of her partner, Greg, a storeman. Other forms of contraception were not suitable.

Worse was to come. She was told she would lose the baby so she had a termination, which was followed by complications which put her

in hospital on antibiotics for four days. Her doctor found one Filshie clip had fallen off.

Another Sydney woman taking legal action [she did not want to be identified] said she decided on sterilisation after repeated failures with the pill resulted in her having four children aged under six by the time she was 30.

Within four months of being "sterilised" with Filshie clips at Mona Vale Hospital in 1996, she was pregnant. She declined an abortion, and a baby daughter was eventually born prematurely with brain damage and other serious medical problems requiring long-term care and treatment, which were not linked with the sterilisation.

The Commonwealth Government's watchdog on medical devices, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, issued a bulletin to the medical community in September 1998, warning of the problem.

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