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It's the vasectomy off-switch

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VASECTOMIES could be a thing of the past thanks to Australian scientists who are developing a remote-controlled contraceptive implant for men.

The device stops and starts the flow of sperm with the push of a button, using the same technology used to lock a car with a key fob.

Researchers at the University of Adelaide say the valve would remain shut most of the time to act as a contraceptive barrier. A man would use the remote control to open the valve and allow the sperm to pass through when he and his partner wanted to conceive.

The implant, still at the laboratory stage of testing, would provide a much-needed alternative to vasectomy, a surgical procedure not easily reversed if a man changes his mind.

Australia has one of the highest vasectomy rates in the developed world.

A Marie Stopes International survey of 1000 men in 2005 found 29% of men aged 40 to 49 and 34% of men aged 50 to 59 had had the procedure. MSI acting chief Jill Michelson said women tended to bear the burden of preventing unwanted pregnancies and men needed to take more responsibility. "Any new form of contraception is always a good thing," she said.

The implant being devised by the team of biomedical engineers is made from a specially coated silicone-based material to reduce the risk of infection or rejection by the body. No larger than a grain of rice, it would be inserted into the vas deferens - the duct that carries sperm from each testicle to the penis - using a hypodermic needle.

A reader or transmitter outside the body would send a coded radiofrequency pulse to an ID tag inside the body, causing the valve to open and close.

Research team leader Dr Said al-Sarawi said the project was several years away from commercial development.

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