

The **eReview** provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find part two of a three-part series on assisted human reproduction in Canada. Part one can be found [here](#).

Test-tube babies—they *do* grow up

How can donor-conceived adults inform our understanding of assisted human reproductive technologies in Canada?

By Kate Fraher, Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

You may not have heard of Robert Reid. But doctors heralded his arrival on December 25, 1983 as our first made-in-Canada test-tube baby. [1] Reid was conceived using his own parent's egg and sperm, but thousands of babies have been created since then using sperm from an anonymous donor. To those working in fertility centers—doctors and researchers—their lives are evidence of a successful treatment. But some of these young adults are now thinking through their conception, and question the ethics of the technology that brought them into the world.

Donor insemination (DI) is not new; it has been around for over a century. Couples typically turned to DI after discovering that the male partner is infertile—it offered parents a chance to give birth to a child who would be the biological offspring of one of the parents (the mother). Although parents are encouraged to tell their children they are donor conceived, the rest of their origins have typically remained a mystery because sperm donation in Canada is anonymous. [2] While some argue that donor anonymity is in the best interests of the donor and the child, many born through this practice are claiming otherwise.

Take Olivia Pratten, for instance. Pratten was conceived in a fertility clinic in Vancouver BC in 1983. She says that from an early age she always had questions about her donor: What he looks like or does. Not only will Olivia not know the identity of her biological father because sperm donation is anonymous in Canada, but also because her records were apparently lost. The clinic where she was conceived closed down and she believes her records are gone, if they ever existed. [3]

This leads to a major concern: Fertility clinics are not obligated to maintain any donor records according to current Canadian law, neither are they obligated to keep records of children conceived by

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donor sperm. This is why it is impossible to know how many donor-conceived children there are in Canada, says Roger Pierson, Director of the Reproductive Biology Research unit at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Medicine. [4]

In 2004, a national donor registry was legislated with the passage of Canada's Human Assisted Reproduction Act, but it does not yet exist. The regulations for the registry still need to be written by Assisted Human Reproduction Canada (AHRC), Canada's new agency. Therefore, it is still unknown what types of information will be available to DI kids. [5] For instance, will donor offspring have access to donor medical records to check for genetically transmitted diseases? [6] Will they have access to their donor's anonymous ID number so they can track down other half-siblings with the same donor? [7] Or, although highly unlikely, could they be given as much as a name and phone number so they can actually contact their donor? These questions are still unanswered.

Sweden, for example, has made "open identity" sperm donors mandatory. These donors must provide information to their offspring once they reach age 18, should the children want it. [8] Again, it is unknown whether Canada's registry will adopt similar legislation where donors can choose to be contacted by their offspring once the child grows up.

Some feel that denying children the right to half of their genetic history is unethical. Diane Allen, co-founder of the Toronto-based Infertility Network, has offered support and information to donor offspring and their parents for the past 17 years. She has observed some offspring who are not bothered by the 'unknowns' of their past, and others who are deeply distressed that they are missing "50% of the pieces of the puzzle that make up who they are." She doesn't think this should be left up to governments or clinics to decide for these adults "what they can and cannot know about themselves." And she has also met some offspring who want to see the end of donor-conception, all told. [9]

A report entitled *The Revolution of Parenthood: the Emerging Global Clash between Adult Rights and Children's Needs* states that some DI adults are upset that their parents "intentionally planned to deny them a relationship (and often knowledge of the identity of) at least one of their biological parents" even before they were conceived. The author, Elizabeth Marquardt, who is studying the effect of donor conception on children's identity, says that while these children may grow up knowing that they are loved and wanted by their parents, "as children grow up and begin to form their own identities, they tell us, it is also essential to know where they came from." [10]

This is true for Olivia Pratten. In a presentation to MPs at the IMFC's first annual policy conference in September 2006, Pratten

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said, "I suppose at one point when I'm 40, 50, 60 I'll know that he isn't around anymore and maybe then I'll stop looking for his face - I don't know." In the mean time, she wonders if she'll see glimpses of 'him' on the faces of her future children or if she has perhaps already met 'him,' without even knowing it. [11]

How DI kids feel shouldn't be the only basis for public policy decisions, but Assisted Human Reproduction Canada would do well to heed the advice of DI adults and those working in the field who have seen that DI is a whole lot more than just a technological success: it's a human life.

[1] 'Test-tube babies' are babies conceived through the process of in-vitro fertilization where sperm and an egg are combined outside of the woman's body and transferred to the uterus.

[2] Most fertility experts today, encourage parents who use donor insemination to tell their children the truth about their origins. In the past, this was sometimes discouraged as it was thought that disclosure would create a relational rift between the non-biological parent and child or because they feared that the known father would be stigmatized for his infertility. In these cases, children grew up thinking that both parents were their biological kin, even if this was not the case.

[3] Olivia Pratten, the Institute of Marriage and Family Inaugural Family Policy Conference, September 26, 2006. Her presentation can be retrieved online at: <http://www.imfcanada.org/Default.aspx?go=article&aid=118&tid=8>

[4] R. Pierson, personal communication, February 26, 2007.

[5] Ibid.

[6] In some cases, donor offspring develop medical conditions that are genetically transmitted, but neither they nor their parents are able to obtain medical information from donors. This is because fertility clinics are not obligated to keep track of donors, or their offspring. They are also not obligated to provide this information to children and families. Neither are clinics obligated to update donor health records to record diseases that donors may succumb to after they make their donation.

[7] Donor-conceived adults who know their donor's number can now use websites to track down their donor parents and/or donor siblings. This Valentine's Day, a donor known as "Donor 150" made contact with his daughters after they were featured in a NYT article for finding each other through the website donorsiblingregistry.com. Jeffrey Harrison has since met three of his daughters and discovered offspring in four other states, making him the biological father of at least 7 young adults. To read this story in the New York Times, click here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/14/us/14donor.html?ex=1329109200&en=36011329bec29b1e&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss> Other websites such as [Tangled Webs](http://TangledWebs.com) and [UK DonorLink](http://UKDonorLink.com) offer donor offspring a chance to share their common experience or find other half-siblings with the same donor.

[8] Scheib, J.E., Riordan, M., & Rubin, S. (2005). Adolescents with open-identity sperm donors: reports from 12-17 year olds. *Human Reproduction*, 20(1), 248. Retrieved from <http://humrep.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/20/1/239?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&searchid=1&FIRSTINDEX=0&minscore=5000&resourcetype=HWCIT>

[9] D. Allen, personal communication, February 26, 2007.

[10] In her report *The Revolution in Parenthood: The Emerging Global Clash Between Adult Rights and Children's Needs*, Marquardt says that as donor-conceived children grow up, "they look in the mirror and see features and expression they don't share with the parents who are raising them...they start asking questions." This report, co-published by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada can be retrieved from http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/Revolution%20in%20Parenthood.pdf

[11] Olivia Pratten, the Institute of Marriage and Family Inaugural Family Policy Conference, September 26, 2006.

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