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How do donor conceived children fare and feel?

A new report examines the outcomes

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There have been many rapid changes in the field of reproduction in recent years. Take for example, Quebec's decision to fund three rounds of in vitro fertilization for all women in that province who want it, on July 13, 2010. [1] Still, these new terrains of scientific advancement raise ethical concerns, in spite of their popularity. There are an estimated 30 to 60 thousand children conceived each year through sperm donation in the United States. [2] And this is the subject of a recent in-depth examination of the experiences and issues of young adults conceived through sperm donation. *My Daddy's Name is Donor* by Elizabeth Marquardt, Norval D. Glenn and Karen Clark examines a sample of 485 adults between the ages 18 and 45, drawn from over one million households. The authors report that "on average, young adults conceived through sperm donation are hurting more, are more confused and feel more isolated from their families" than those who were either adopted or raised by their biological parents. [3]

The study compares donor conceived offspring, biologically raised and adopted children. Data which is solely relevant to the donor conceived adults is divided into subcategories of those raised by lesbian parents, single mothers and heterosexual parents. While each category produced different results, 65 per cent of all donor offspring agreed with the comment "my sperm donor is half of who I am." [4] Upon finding out the circumstances of their births many faced existential questions about who their donor parent is and what his family may have been like. When asked whether or not the donor conceived individual wanted a relationship with their donor, 63 per cent answered yes. [5] However as the authors note, locating the donor parent is a near impossible task due to donor anonymity laws.

Though the report focuses on the United States, Canada faces a similar situation. In 2004, the federal government enacted the Assisted Human Reproduction Act [6] in an effort to regulate the assisted reproduction industry. In 2006, the Assisted Human Reproduction Canada (AHRC) watchdog committee was created to enforce critical aspects of the mandate such as the ban on the sale of sperm and the regulation of fertility clinics. [7]

The AHRC's ban on the sale of sperm in Canada was responsible for the drastic decrease of Canadian sperm banks forcing fertility clinics to import 80 per cent of the donor sperm used from the United States where the sale of sperm is still legal. [8] This means that donor conceived Canadians face similar issues with anonymity restrictions as their American counterparts. However this may change pending the results of a class action lawsuit set to enter court late 2010. [9]

Whether in Canada or the United States, donor anonymity raises a number of ethical concerns. A major one concerns the rights of the child. Based on results from the survey showing that 67 per cent wanted to know their donor father's identity, [10] it is clear that withholding information from the donor offspring with the intent of protecting the donors and clinics has inadvertently harmed the child.

While most felt negatively affected by having the donor identity withheld, 76 percent of the sample supported the universal right to have a child and the use of artificial reproductive technologies. [11] Yet there were still a large number who had ethical concerns regarding the exchange of money for sperm, others believed it was wrong to deliberately conceive a child as a single parent and finally, 37 percent agreed that they would persuade any friend considering sperm donor conception against it. [12] While there is no absolute consensus, the writers claim that without any proper health policy, legislation and ethical guidelines in place, the rights of the donor offspring will continue to be overlooked.

Another concern raised is whether and how the child should learn of his origins. The survey showed that the lesbian parent sample had been the most honest and as a result the child was best able to accept their normalcy and trust their parents. Children who found out accidentally felt that because their origin was kept secret, it was shameful. [13] Of the young adults whose origin was kept a secret 51 per cent were likely to report mental issues, 36 per cent reported substance abuse and 29 per cent had problems with the law. [14] Certainly, some are fine with their origins and many agree with the continued right to conceive through a donor. Yet it is still fair to say that many of donor offspring have trouble coping and are against the practice. Almost half (48 per cent) of donor children agree that adoption is a better option than donor conception. [15]

The authors offer a series of recommendations for leaders, parents and researchers. From ending anonymous sperm donation, to increasing the screening process for donor conception to the level of adoption, to limiting the amount of offspring that can be born from a single donor, the authors touch on a comprehensive list of ways to ensure that the next generation of donor offspring are protected, accepted and able to thrive. It's fair to conclude that many of these recommendations could be applied in Canada too. No matter where they live, the hope is to see greater consideration given to the donor conceived population and more effective policies to protect the donor child's rights and wellbeing.

Endnotes

- [1] Lévesque, L. (2010, July 13). Quebec women to get free fertility treatments. *The Toronto Star*. Retrieved July 14, 2010 from <http://www.thestar.com/article/835265--quebec-women-to-get-free-fertility-treatments-beginning-this-summer>.
- [2] Marquardt, E., Glenn, N., and Clark, C. (2010). My Daddy's name is Donor. New York: The Institute for American Values. Retrieved July 5, 2010 from http://www.familyscholars.org/assets/Donor_FINAL.pdf pp. 17.
- [3] Marquardt et al., p. 5.
- [4] Marquardt et al., p. 7.
- [5] Marquardt et al., p. 61.
- [6] Department of Justice of Canada. (2004). C-2: An Act respecting human assisted reproduction and related research. Retrieved July 12, 2010 from http://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/A-13.4/page-1.html#anchorbo-ga:s_1
- [7] Four years later, the agency has yet to develop and enforce any of its regulations. With a 10 million dollar budget and no action taken, three members of the committee's board have resigned while several MPs have called for the dissolution of the committee due to its inaction and what is seen as a poor use of funds. For more see story: Disband Canada's Fertility Industry Watchdog: MP. (2010, June 15). National Post. Retrieved July 12, 2010 from <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/Disband+fertility+industry+monitor/3156448/story.html>
- [8] Collier, R. (2010, February 23). Sperm donor pool shrivels when payments cease. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. Retrieved July 12, 2010 from <http://www.cmaj.ca/cgi/content/full/182/3/233>
- [9] B.C. court issues injunction in class-action over sperm, egg donor births. (2009, October 28). CBC News. Retrieved July 12, 2010 from <http://www.cbc.ca/health/story/2008/10/28/bc-donor-births-lawsuit.html>
- The date of her court case is alluded to under her Family Scholars blogger profile. Retrieved July 14, 2010 from <http://familyscholars.org/bloggers/>
- [10] Marquardt et al., pp. 61.
- [11] Marquardt et al., pp. 63.
- [12] Marquardt et al., pp. 65.
- [13] Marquardt et al., pp. 56.
- [14] Marquardt et al., pp. 58.
- [15] Marquardt et al., pp. 73.