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Are you my sister?

This woman had 15 half-siblings she had never met. We explore the new rules that allow donor-conceived children to trace their brothers and sisters

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Chloe reads details of her biological father, and others conceived with his sperm (Jon Tonks)

The letter was little more than a list of measurements and statistics. Yet masked by the short summary of facts and figures that arrived at the Woodmansterne household earlier this year was the most personal and potentially life-transforming information for the family's youngest member, 17-year-old Chloe.

Chloe twists and untwists her long, slim legs, twirling a strand of her dark hair between her fingers as she starts to read out the letter. It is a response to a request by Chloe's parents to know what details were held on record by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) about the man who donated his sperm so that their daughter could be conceived in a basement clinic near Harley Street in March 1992. Chloe reads out these details quickly, without pausing for breath: "height 183 centimetres, weight 64 kilos, eye-colour brown, hair-colour dark brown, skin-colour light, own children none at time

of donation, born 1963, interested in the theatre." She then reads out the donor's occupation, which is so unusual and specific that we quickly agree that if he were to read it in this article he would quite possibly recognise himself, which Chloe is not sure she would want to happen in this way. "I did think it was pretty cool he had that job, though," she says. "I was also struck by how light he was for his height, which makes me think he must have been very lanky, like me."

It is the second piece of information requested by Chloe's parents, however, that holds far more interest for their daughter. They had asked for details of other children born as a result of the same man's sperm donations. Chloe became curious when she attended a meeting in March organised by the Donor Conception Network for families created with the help of donor eggs, sperm or embryos. There she struck up a friendship with a girl who looked like her. Could they be sisters, she wondered?

Chloe has known since the age of four that she was conceived with the help of a stranger's sperm. Her father, Paul, was infertile after contracting mumps when his wife, Bella, was five weeks pregnant with their first child, Chloe's elder brother, Seth, who is now 23. "It always made me feel special knowing that my parents had to go through so much so that I could be born," says Chloe. "It made me feel very wanted and loved."

Until recently, however, Chloe had never shown much interest in her genetic origins. "I never felt I needed an extra link. I already have a family," she says. For this reason, her mother says the family had not sought to find out anything before. "We were very clear it was up to Chloe to decide if she wanted to know more when she was older."

By comparing the sketchy details Chloe had about her biological father with those of her new friend's father, the two girls very quickly realised they were not related.

"It would have been cool if we were. But we're still good friends. We're the same age and have a lot of things in common," says Chloe, who lives with her family in St Albans.

That Chloe discovered, however, is that she does have half-siblings — 15 in all. "I have six half-brothers and nine half-sisters," she says as she continues reading the letter. "Five half-sisters and one half-brother were born in 1992, three half-brothers and three half-sisters were born in 1993, and two half-brothers and one half-sister in 1994…

"That's quite a lot, isn't it?" she smiles, finally looking up a little shyly from the letter.

It was not until 1991 that the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act made it mandatory for all births in this country resulting from donated eggs and sperm to be registered on a central HFEA database. But even then the identity of donors was protected and only the barest of details were listed.

In the past it has been left to voluntary groups to offer services comparing DNA samples of those seeking such information in the hope that their sperm-donor father or egg-donor mother and possibly half-siblings are also seeking contact. In Britain one of the main groups is UK DonorLink, a voluntary register for people who were donors or donor-conceived before 1991, and in the US, the Donor Sibling Registry. In 2005 the law changed again, making it compulsory for the name and further identifying details of all donors who donate eggs and sperm to be kept on record so that they can be accessed on adulthood by any children conceived. As a result of this change, the profile of sperm donors has shifted from the traditional students in search of a small payment and a few laughs to older men, many with children of their own, who sympathise with the agonies infertility can cause for couples wanting a family. In 1994-5 two-thirds of all donors were under the age of 30. Today the most common age group is 36-40, with more than 40% already having children.

When Chloe turns 18 this November, she will be among the first group of donor-conceived adults able to register their details on the Donor Sibling Link, a new database set up by the HFEA in April this year. The link aims to provide for the first time an official forum to facilitate contact between half-siblings

conceived after 1991. Around 2,000 people are born each year in this country from donated eggs, sperm and embryos, and around 36,000 have been born as a result of donor treatment at HFEA-licensed centres over the past 20 years. Since the 2005 law lifting anonymity for donors is not retroactive, however, most of these children have no legal right to trace the full identity of their biological parents.

Chloe is still wondering whether to actively seek contact with her 15 half-siblings when she reaches 18. “I already have a brother and lots of cousins. I don’t feel I need any more family,” she says. If any of her 15 half-siblings were to seek her out, however, she doubts she would refuse. Whether such contact moved beyond swapping information would depend, she says bluntly, on “whether I found I liked them or not”.

Ryan Kramer, 20, is thrilled to discover his younger half-siblings (James Chance)

As Chloe leaves the room briefly to go in search of the children’s storybook that her parents used as a way to tell her about her origins, Bella and Paul, both 50, say how struck they were at the meeting they attended by how late in life other children were told they were donor-conceived.

Some had discovered by accident as adults as a result of routine blood tests that showed they were not genetically related to one of their parents.

“We were astonished at how few parents seemed to be comfortable letting their children know automatically. Why on earth would you keep that sort of information from your child? I believe it’s their right to know,” says Paul, who owns his own greetings-cards company.

“For us there was never any doubt that we would tell Chloe as soon as we could,” says Bella, even though at the time she sought fertility treatment this was far from commonplace. Some fertility clinics even discouraged it. “Twenty years ago people didn’t talk about having fertility treatment as openly as they do now. It was all rather hush-hush. Even the basement clinic near Harley Street where I went for treatment was totally anonymous. There was no sign on the door saying what it was. I think the reason people didn’t talk about it then, and some still don’t,” says Bella, “has to do with male pride and some sense of shame at admitting to infertility.

“It’s always been a taboo subject,” says Paul. “Some men confuse masculinity, virility and fertility. But it doesn’t take much to work out that they are not the same.”

Professor Lisa Jardine, chairwoman of the HFEA, confirms when we speak later that donor-conceived children have faced similar attitudes to those that once confronted children who were adopted.

“For a very long time donor conception was an embarrassment or something to be concealed, just as adoption had been. It was regarded as a guilty secret, and the truth about it was often only revealed within families at moments of anger or on someone’s deathbed.”

Because of the emotional damage such belated revelations can cause, all couples undergoing fertility treatment involving donated eggs, sperm or embryos are now strongly advised to tell their children of their origins.

Professor Jardine concedes, though, that it is impossible to make disclosure compulsory, and in religions where such treatment for infertility is either frowned on or forbidden, it could dissuade some from seeking help. “Every family’s situation is different, and anyway, a society without any secrets would almost certainly be a pretty grim place.”

Chloe is also quite measured on the subject when she returns. “I think I would have felt very upset if I found out my parents had been keeping something like that secret from me, and when I listened to what some donor-conceived people had to say at the meeting, it was clear they were upset they were not told earlier. But every family is different.” The eloquent teenager concedes that some parents might feel uncomfortable about their children seeking information about a biological parent or half-siblings, fearing it might influence relationships within the family. “As far as I’m concerned, I’m only interested in finding out more to know where some of my character traits might have come from. Like why I’m good at science and no-one else in my family is. And why I’m extremely stubborn,” she laughs.

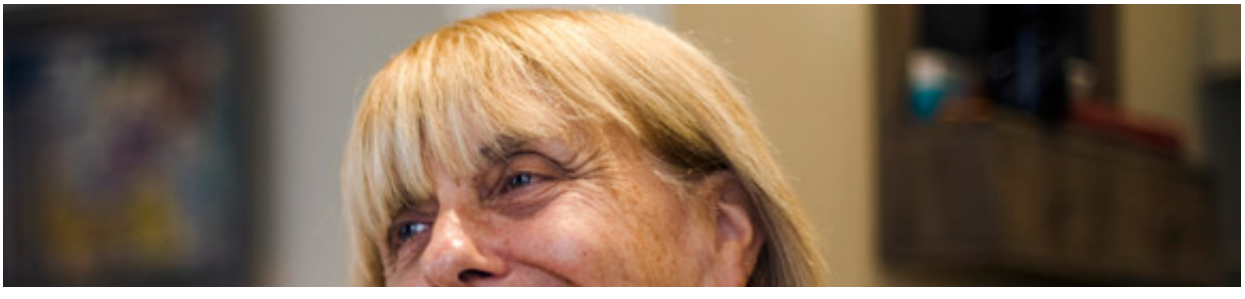
Extraordinary stories have emerged in the past about half-siblings brought up in different countries discovering, when they finally make contact as adults through voluntary donor link-up sites, that they share an unusual talent for languages, for instance, or other skills and interests. In one case two half-sisters discovered they had both converted to Catholicism within months of each other in their twenties.

Chloe also recognises that knowing more about her donor’s medical history could be important in future. With around 30,000 genes now identified as placing those who carry them at higher risk of certain diseases such as breast and colon cancer, family genetics is increasingly recognised as key to diagnosis and disease prevention.

All donated sperm and eggs undergo screening for diseases and medical conditions, but detailed genetic profiling at the time of donation is not available.

Sperm donations have remained relatively stable at between 300 and 400 a year over the past 20 years, and the number of egg donors has more than doubled to around 1,000 a year. Yet the demand for fertility treatment has steadily increased, so there is now a shortage of donors. With one in six couples in the UK experiencing fertility problems, there are too few sperm donors as well as egg donors to meet demand. As a result, the HFEA is now carrying out a review of its donation policy.

One of the most controversial aspects of this policy is the strict limit on the compensation donors can be paid to cover expenses or loss of earnings for their donation. This limit currently rests at £55.19 per day, or a maximum of £250 per course of sperm, egg or embryo donation — although novel additional incentives have been tried by some clinics, such as the “oats for your oats” campaign in Scotland offering men a bowl of porridge in return for donating sperm.



Given the lengthy treatment women donating eggs have to undergo to make their

Professor Lisa Jardine, head of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (Paul Rogers)

donation, these limits are considered by many, including Professor Jardine, to be too low. Others believe reversing the decision to lift donor anonymity would be the key to encouraging more men and women to come forward and donate. Both Chloe and her brother, Seth, are convinced of it.

Seth, a student, says he would like to become a donor "because I've seen the benefit — I have a sister as a result". But he says the prospect of being contacted later by potential offspring prevents him from doing so, even though he would have no legal or financial responsibility for them. "Whatever the law may say, I would feel some sort of moral obligation to those children I helped bring to life," says Seth. "Also I would be doing something now that could have repercussions for any family I might have in future. How do I know how any future wife would feel about it?"

Given her curiosity about her genetic origins and the 15 half-siblings she has now discovered, it seems surprising that Chloe would argue so vociferously for anonymity to be reinstated for donors. Yet this is the argument she chose for a recent public-speaking exam. "I would rather exist and live my life than know exactly who my genetic and biological father is," she concluded.

Others feel strongly, however, that reinstating anonymity for donors would be a retrograde step. Rachel, 27, a teaching assistant from Leicester who did not find out she was donor-conceived until two years ago, says: "It's a basic human need to want to reach out and make contact with your blood kin. I believe the option of contact with both half-siblings and donor should be non-negotiable. This doesn't mean anyone is forced to have relationships they don't want to have, just that the option is there."

Rachel only discovered her origins when she was pregnant. Blood tests revealed her blood group was AB. "My dad's blood group was O, and I knew from A-level biology that this meant he couldn't be my biological father. I was shocked. My first thought was to wonder if my mum had had an affair. I didn't even know if my dad knew I was not his biological child." When Rachel confronted her mother, the truth came out. Rachel's anguish was complicated by the fact that her father suffers from a genetic kidney disease, which she had long believed she had a 50% chance of inheriting. When he fell gravely ill and was put on dialysis during her early twenties, she was told by doctors that she would have to be tested every year to check she was not developing the condition herself.

At this point, Rachel explains, her mother told her she had wanted her daughter to know the truth. "But my dad was too ill. He couldn't cope with me finding out then," she says, falling silent for a long while before adding: "They should have told me when I was a kid. That would have been the right thing to do."

Soon after Rachel discovered she was donor-conceived, she provided a DNA sample to UK DonorLink. Within six months a half-brother was traced; he had not known of his origins either.

"The first time we met, it was like a missing piece of a jigsaw fell into place," Rachel says. "I have very curly hair and no-one else in my family does. But he does, and we have the same shape and colour eyes

and are both very shy."

The two have stayed in contact ever since, and now Rachel, who grew up an only child, is keen to discover how many other half-siblings she has. It is possible she has dozens. "If I do, I would like to meet them all," she says. "They would never replace my existing family, just be an addition to it. Just like finding my biological father would never replace my dad."

Olivia Montuschi, co-founder of the Donor Conception Network, a British charity that connects families created with the help of donated eggs, sperm or embryos, explains that it is common for donor-conceived young people to be more interested in half-siblings than in their donor. "It is far less threatening than finding out about a donor, who they might worry they might not like." One of the main reasons many donor-conceived people seek such contact is simply to find someone who looks like them, especially if they do not bear a strong resemblance to their natural parent.

"It's part of the basic human need to find connections with others. This urge is often particularly strong in women, especially when they start families of their own," says Montuschi, whose 27-year-old son and 24-year-old daughter were both donor-conceived. Her daughter is keen to find out more about her donor and half-siblings, while her son shows no interest.


The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority is rethinking its policy on donors (Jon Tonks)

In the United States, unlike in Britain, donor anonymity is still guaranteed, no cap exists on payments donors can receive for sperm or egg donation, and no limit is placed on the number of children who can be born from one person's donations. Often half-siblings are conceived within a few years of each other and sometimes live in close proximity, since their mothers received fertility treatment at the same clinics.

This is borne out by data collated over the past decade by the Donor Sibling Registry. According to Wendy Kramer, who founded the register a decade ago to help her son Ryan trace any half-siblings he might have, the largest group of half-siblings so far documented numbers 125. Other groups of 30, 40 or 50 half-siblings are also not uncommon. Since American clinics collecting donations ship sperm and eggs around the world, many of these groups span several continents. With much of the registry information confidential, however, few details of such extended kin are available.

Kramer can only talk of her and her son's experience, she says, which in itself illustrates the complex emotions and family dramas surrounding donor conception. Now 51, Kramer was married at the time her son was born — the couple had sought fertility treatment when they found out they could not have

children together — but she raised Ryan as a single mother, as she and her husband split up when he was an infant. “Ryan grew up knowing from a very young age he was donor-conceived and very quickly started asking questions I couldn’t answer about his donor and whether he had any half-brothers and sisters,” she says.

“In the beginning we just thought, ‘Imagine one day if we could connect a brother and a sister — that would be fabulous.’ We had no idea our project would take off in the way it did.”

Since it was founded in 2000 the registry has matched 7,370 half-siblings in 20 countries worldwide, sometimes as a result of DNA testing if donors’ identification numbers are not known. Despite being the first person to post the scant details he knew about his donor on the site, including his identifying number, 1058, it took her son Ryan, then 10, several years before he was able to trace any half-siblings. Even then he suffered deep disappointment at first.

When he was 13 a mother contacted the registry to say she had conceived two daughters by the same donor. She even sent a picture of the two girls, then 7 and 10.

There were striking similarities between the facial features of the three children.

“I was immensely excited to think I had two half-sisters and that I might actually get to meet them,” recalls Ryan, now 20, who grew up an only child.

Then the mother dropped the bombshell: her daughters did not know they were conceived from donor sperm and she had absolutely no intention of ever telling them.

At that point all contact stopped, an experience Ryan describes as “frustrating” and “devastating”. Two years later a teenage girl, six months younger than Ryan, contacted the registry to say she realised from their matching donor number that she was his half-sister.

She had been told as a child that she was donor-conceived, yet her mother had warned her to never search for half-siblings because they were nothing to do with her.

When the girl admitted she had traced Ryan, her parents ordered her to sever all contact with him. “It was back to the waiting game,” he says.

While the register clocked up more and more matches, he almost gave up hope of ever finding half-siblings. “Only a deep curiosity about my genetic code kept me going,” he says. “I wanted to know where that came from.”

That same year, when he was 15, Ryan’s curiosity was partially satisfied. As a result of detective work by an online DNA company offering to trace genealogy, Ryan and his mother managed to identify “Donor 1058” as an engineer in his early forties who lived hundreds of miles from their home in Colorado. When they contacted the man, he agreed to meet at a hotel near his home. “That was wild,” says Ryan. “At first there was a lot of gawking going on, comparing hands, finding similar features, stuff like that.” But as the two talked they found they shared an interest in engineering. “None of my mother’s side of the family had that interest.” Ryan has a prodigious talent for science. Finishing high school at 14, he went on to study aerospace engineering at university, graduating with a master’s degree at 19. This month he starts work with Nasa.

While Ryan and his donor are still in touch occasionally, a totally unexpected relationship resulted from their contact —a close bond with the donor’s parents. Neither the donor nor his brother have children of their own, so Ryan is their only grandchild. “They are just thrilled to have found him, and so are we,” says Kramer.

More discoveries were to follow. In 2007, when Ryan was 16, another half-sister made contact with the Donor Sibling Registry. Her name was Anna. She was 13, lived in New York and wanted to meet. “At

first it was quite awkward. Neither of us knew how to behave or what to say. But then we started recognising things we shared, not just how we looked but how we moved and even how we answered questions. It seemed like our brains were wired in the same way," says Ryan. "We quickly developed a real bond. It's been fantastic."

A year later a further two half-siblings made contact: two sisters from Boston called Natalie and Kristina. This summer Kristina,18, Natalie, 14, and Anna, now 17, travelled to Colorado to spend the July 4th holiday getting to know Ryan, his mother and each other better. All are now curious about how many other half-siblings they have, recognising that it could be dozens. "When I started the register I had no idea it would lead to this," says Kramer. "It's been a real joy."

Whether Chloe will one day discover more about her 15 half-siblings depends on whether they have been told they are donor-conceived and whether they are curious enough to register with the Donor Sibling Link. If not, she says she is relaxed about them remaining a mystery.

In the course of discussing family backgrounds, Chloe's mother, Bella, reveals she knows nothing about the identity of one her grandfathers. Her grandmother had been a companion to the mistress of the King of Italy during the second world war and, unsure of who had fathered her child, abandoned her mother in an Italian orphanage. "There are many families with missing links like these," Bella says. "It's something you grow up learning to accept."

As Chloe grows older, however, and in time has a family of her own, she recognises that her desire to know more about others with whom she is genetically linked could intensify. "Family is a flexible thing," she says with a wisdom beyond her years. "Our understanding of family changes as we grow."