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Woman, 68, perseveres in quest for donor father and her identity

The need to know who your biological parents are can be powerful for those conceived by donor sperm or eggs.

By Maureen O'Hagan

Seattle Times staff reporter

The voice on the other end of the phone was insistent:

"I don't know who my biological father was."

It was a story we'd heard before: a woman conceived with sperm from an anonymous donor, trying to find her true identity. But this call was different. The caller was wry, her voice crackly. She sounded — how should we put this delicately? — like a senior citizen.

Which it turns out she was. Vicki Reilly, of Bainbridge Island, is 68, born in 1943. Yes, "artificial insemination" was performed back then. Which Reilly knows comes as a surprise to many, who think sperm-donor children are all exactly that: young children.

"It ticks me off that people always talk about the kids," she said.

In recent years, she's read countless reports on how the baby-making industry is booming. She's seen stories of donor-conceived teens and 20-somethings finding half-siblings online.

What no one seems to talk about is people like her. People in their 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond, who were also donor-conceived, but who were born at a time when families didn't talk about such things. Back then, couples just quietly made appointments with "special doctors," and never breathed a word of it to anyone — including their children.

"There's a whole bunch of us out there," Reilly said, "and a lot of people searching."

Reilly is married, with four grown children (two biological, one stepson, and one foster son from Vietnam). She owned a picture-framing shop, ran a charter-boat business and was a Turkish translator. She has had a good life.

It may seem odd, then, that she is so consumed by this mystery, that it has caused her so much hurt.

To Reilly, it hits at the core of her very identity.

"What are my roots?" she wonders. "Am I Native American? Italian? Where did my sense of humor come from?"

There are very real concerns about health history, as well.

Experts say there are likely hundreds of thousands of people who are donor-conceived but don't know it. And if you get right down to it, that's what ticks off Reilly the most: the secrecy.

Fertility industry

Nobody knows when donor sperm was first used. Naomi Cahn, a George Washington University law professor who's written a book on the fertility industry, says there are vague references going back to the 1400s.

"It's also got a very, very long history of secrecy," she said.

The first known recorded case was in 1884, when a doctor at a Philadelphia medical school inseminated a woman, under anesthesia, using sperm from his "best looking" student.

It took 25 years before the story was reported in a medical journal.

"At that time the procedure was so novel, so peculiar in its human ethics, that the six young men ... who witnest [sic] the operation were pledged to absolute secrecy," the report says.

The woman, who wasn't in on the secret, believed the resulting baby was her husband's. He was "delighted with the idea." He had acquired a sexually-transmitted disease in his younger days that made him infertile.

Back then, "you didn't talk about infertility," Cahn explained. In this regard, some families found artificial insemination preferable to adoption: "The woman gets pregnant, has a baby, and nobody needs to know," Cahn said.

Besides, the article goes on to state, it was a "scientific fact" that the origin of the sperm doesn't matter.

Absolute hooey, Reilly and other donor-conceived people say.

Something wasn't right

Reilly grew up in Michigan, always feeling something wasn't right. She knew her parents loved her. But her father was cold, distant — and so very different from her. "Like the swan and the ducklings," she said.

Her father was a conservative man with a straight way of looking at the world. Reilly was liberal and cynical, with a strong sense of humor. Her conversations are punctuated with a laugh like a firecracker.

"My poor dad never rocked the boat," she said. "I love rocking the boat."

No one's exactly the same as their parents, of course. But Reilly always felt — rightly, it turns out — that there was a secret she wasn't in on. It affected the way she looked at her family, and the world.

"You sort of feel like you don't belong and you're not sure why," she said. "I think genetics, biology, has a lot to do with who we are."

Reilly was never told, but even as a child, she began putting together clues. She remembers, at age 9, overhearing family friends ask her grandparents: Why didn't little Vicki have any siblings?

Reilly's father had the mumps, her grandparents explained, so her mother had to go to a special doctor in Chicago, 150 miles away.

Reilly remembers wondering: "Why, if *he* had the mumps did *she* have to go to the doctor?"

In high school, she learned that blue-eyed parents, like hers, couldn't have a brown-eyed child, like her. When questioned, her mother responded with a laugh, "It must have been the milkman!" she said. And that was that.

As a teen, Reilly had a vague idea about how prized horses were bred. "Either my mother had an affair," Reilly concluded, "or they used artificial insemination."

Until the 1950s, sperm had to be fresh, not frozen. There weren't commercial sperm banks like there are today.

Who would have donated the sperm in 1942, Reilly wondered? The doctor's intern? More likely, she figured, it was the doctor himself. Back then, it wouldn't have been unusual, Cahn, the professor, said.

Reilly remembered a photo of the doctor her mother held onto for decades. She also found letters he wrote to the family, inquiring after her. "Vicki must be such a big girl now," he wrote. "I'm anxious to hear all about her."

There were other clues, but Reilly didn't pursue the issue until her father died. Then, she took up an intense search. By this point, her mother had Alzheimer's and the doctor was dead.

If Reilly had been adopted, there would be court records and a birth certificate. Not so with donor sperm. Even today, most donors are told their identity will be kept secret. And many couples still don't tell their children, says Wendy Kramer, who founded the Donor Sibling Registry website for this very reason: to make the process less anonymous.

"Family secrets are toxic," she said.

To the industry and to donors, secrecy can be a good thing. However, that can lead to unforeseen issues.

For example, the industry is not required to track how many kids are born to each donor.

Through Kramer's website, she learned that one donor was so prolific, he fathered 150 children. (He was tracked by families via his "donor number.")

Even health information isn't always passed on to the families, Kramer and others say.

"It's one thing if you have a biological father who passes along a medical issue when he has two kids," Kramer said. But 150 kids? That's another thing entirely, especially since health information isn't always passed onto the families, Kramer said.

Law in Washington

Last year, a law took effect in Washington requiring sperm donors to provide identifying information and a health history. Sperm banks must keep it on file; donor children may request it after age 18.

The law has a loophole, however: The donor can ask for his identifying information to be kept secret.

"I really feel," Reilly said, "that anonymous sperm and egg donation is very, very wrong."

Bill Cordray, a donor-conceived Utah man, has long been outspoken about the issue. Growing up, Cordray said, he was so different from his three brothers that he could only conclude that his mother had multiple affairs.

He, too, felt his parents were keeping secrets. It turns out they were.

In 1983, at 37, Cordray said his mother finally told him the truth. She said she kept the secret to protect him. It didn't.

All it did was make him feel out of place for decades.

"They were keeping it (secret) for their own sake," he said. "To me, it was a selfish act. To not tell your child the truth about life is not right."

It took Cordray four years to find someone else like him; now he knows of thousands through a Web group he moderates. That's how he met Reilly.

Reilly has spent nearly 10 years trying to figure out the identity of her sperm donor. A few years ago, she tracked down the doctor's son and spent hundreds of dollars on DNA tests for the two of them. They did not come up as a half-sibling match. But she learned later it was the wrong kind of DNA test.

She still believes the doctor was her biological father. In 2010, she did another DNA test, through a genealogy website, which has matched her with hundreds of distant cousins who share her genetic makeup. The doctor's surname is listed among them, but she feels uncomfortable asking the doctor's son to do a newer DNA test.

"Before I pass on, I'd like to know where I came from," she said. "I just do. It's not idle curiosity, either.

"I want to know when I look in the mirror, who I am."

Maureen O'Hagan: 206-464-2562 or mohagan@seattletimes.com