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Donor conception: 'Who's my Daddy?'

Who's my Daddy?

Anonymous sperm donors have made parenthood possible for so many people unable to conceive the traditional way. But as TRALEE PEARCE reports, now their offspring are coming of age, a whole new generation wanting to know about the mystery men who helped to make them

By Tralee Pearce. Globe & Mail. June 18, 2005.

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Sage Beatson doesn't have a dad. The precocious, preternaturally articulate 10-year-old has a piece of paper listing his characteristics. Well, not all of them, just the ones available to her mom, Pam Beatson, when she selected his sperm at a London, Ont., clinic in 1995: A-positive blood type, British descent, brown hair, hazel eyes, muscular, six feet tall, computer consultant, MBA. His interests are listed as art, literature and sports.

"I think I was 3 when I asked, 'Is my daddy dead?' " recalls Sage, who has changed out of her Montessori uniform and sits on a maroon couch in her sunny home in Stratford, Ont. "I was surprised you were thinking like that," says Ms. Beatson, a single-mom psychotherapist in private practice. "I told you you don't really have a dad, but the man who helped make you, I don't know if he's alive or dead." "I remember wondering if he ran away," Sage says.

The girl talks openly about a crying jag when she was 6, and of a lonely feeling she would have at bedtime, "a feeling of wanting to go home."

For Eve Andrews, there was nothing gradual about finding out that the man she thought was her biological father was not. About a year ago, the 17-year-old Texan noticed that her mom had left her e-mail open and a number of the subject headings read "artificial insemination." "I clicked on one e-mail, it said something like, 'My daughter doesn't know of her being conceived through A.I. I'm not sure how I am going to tell her, but she is getting older and I need more information about her biological father. She was born on July 28, 1987.' "I was shocked. I looked up artificial insemination, hoping that I had the definition mixed up, but I didn't. At first, I didn't know how to feel. Sad? Mad? Happy? Betrayed? Hurt?"

Ms. Andrews was conceived using donated sperm when her parents thought her father was sterile (he wasn't; they conceived naturally after Eve). When she was 7, her father died of heart failure after a transplant. She and her mother have talked openly about her origins. Now, she's hoping to meet her biological father. "I'm not looking to have a dad, although it would be really nice. I do, though, want to know everything about him."

Sage and Eve are only two of countless donor offspring, as they are known, who won't be celebrating a traditional Father's Day tomorrow. Record-keeping at fertility clinics has been scattershot, but estimates are that more than 16,000 donor insemination children have been born over the past two decades in Canada and one million worldwide.

Donor insemination has brought great relief to those unable to conceive in the traditional way -- infertile couples, single women, gays and lesbians, but these Brave New Children have entered a world not yet able to answer their questions. Although there are donor offspring in middle age, we are about to see the critical mass, a new generation, come of age.

Diane Allen runs the Toronto-based Infertility Network, a registered Canadian charity that specializes in education on infertility solutions. She says that, as a society, we're just starting to grapple with what it means to create children by alternative means. "In adoption, you have an existing social tragedy. It's recognized that there are losses on all sides," she says, adding that in donor conception, you deliberately create a child who, by the very nature of how he is created, is going to be severed from at least one genetic parent and siblings. "He's going to have to contend with those losses," she says. "It fixes for the moment the problem of the infertile couple, but it passes on the losses to the child."

She is watching the progress of Ontario's now-delayed legislation that proposes lifting the veil of secrecy on adoptions in the province. Ms. Allen says the provincial privacy commissioner's concern about the birth mother is misguided. "Ann Cavoukian has privacy and anonymity mixed up. What activists will tell you is that people have a right to privacy. They don't have a right to be anonymous from the children that they helped to create."

This sentiment has led to a worldwide trend to open adoption and donor records. In Britain, children born through sperm or egg donations after April 1, of this year will be allowed to trace their biological parents after they turn 18. (No legal or financial claims can be made.) In the United States, anonymity is the standard, but some clinics operate in a known-donor system, in which donors agree to be available in some capacity to their offspring. Sweden and New Zealand also have known-donor systems.

Concerns about donor insemination are now being tied to the same-sex marriage debate. Margaret Somerville, director of the McGill Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law, opposes same-sex marriage specifically because it changes the definition of "parent" from natural parent to legal parent. She feels that the best interests of children of such marriages may not have been sufficiently considered during the legislative process.

Since one of the arguments for same-sex marriage is that lesbian and gay couples can "produce" children and create families using alternative methods, it's on the radar of people like Dr. Somerville. She told the parliamentary committee holding hearings on the same-sex marriage bill last week that these issues include "children's rights to know the identity of their biological parents or to not have life transmitted to them in certain ways, for instance through technologically created sperm or ova. "Moving away from a basic norm of naturally conceived children who are brought up and raised in their own biological family opens up precedents that carry serious risks and harms for children," she said.

Taken alongside the one-year-old Assisted Human Reproduction Act, which among other things bans payment for sperm and eggs and allows for donor

identities to be released -- but only by written consent of the donor, Canadians are grappling more than ever with the consequences of new reproductive technologies. But for DI kids, it's the not-yet-fully-open system that irks them. Is it a basic human right to know your own biology?

Ms. Allen looks forward to a time when counselling for DI parents is as intense as it is for adoptive parents. "In adoption, you're required to undergo a lengthy home study as a recipient. It's not to look at the dust under the bed but to explore what it means to have a child join the family. The focus is on the welfare of the child in the long run. "How will they support their child's racial or cultural or ethnic heritage? How are they going to tell the child? How will you support their search for their birth family if that's something they choose to do?"

In Olivia Pratten's case, her mother has encouraged her activism in this arena. "I've spoken out about this a lot," the 23-year-old Vancouver student says. "My mother formed the first support group for donor families." Ms. Pratten says she has always known about her conception, but it doesn't make it any simpler to live with. Travelling in Budapest recently, she saw a man who could be her biological father. It was the long arms.

"I love my dad. I have his last name. But I'm looking for a sense of identity." Ms. Pratten says she has resigned herself to the fact that she will probably never know much about her biological father. "I had to grieve that. It wasn't till I was 17 or 18 that I got it. I felt very angry. How dare someone take my choice away from me? How dare the medical profession tell me it doesn't matter?"

Kristen, a Canadian who lives in the United States, was 9 when she found out that her mother had gone to a fertility clinic in Vancouver. "I don't really remember exactly how I found out -- I've probably blocked most of it out. I am not a proponent of this." The 23-year-old, who asked that her identity be protected, says the fact that her mother was living with a woman led her to ask, "Where's my father?" "Which led to an answer. She was very honest. I never accepted it," Kristen says. "It was not something I was proud of. I was so ashamed. I had my story down pat: My father had no interest in having children. My mom's a single mom."

She started telling friends only as she reached adulthood. She is not "out" in her professional life. Kristen says that for a long time she would rather have had an absentee dad. "Or a father that was incarcerated or alcoholic. Because at least you have a face to it. Someone to be angry at or somewhere to put those emotions." She says that at this point, she's not going to be angry at her mother; she's happy to be alive. "It's just a very blank situation. You don't know," she says.

To make matters worse, Kristen found out while in law school that her clinic -- offspring often use the phrase "my clinic," as though it were the second parent -- was the focus of a case in which a woman trying to conceive contracted HIV from a donor and won a case against the clinic run by Dr. Gerald Korn, considered one of the pioneers of artificial insemination. The Supreme Court awarded her \$883,000 in damages in 1991. "I believe she tried to conceive within six months of when I was conceived. I only found out because it was one of the cases in torts class in law school."

You can see why she might want access to her medical files. "The thing with Korn children ["children of the Korn," she jokes] is that I feel there was some deception. My mom requested certain things in a donor -- Jewish and a

medical student. It turns out my background is Northern European and he was a philosophy student. I've wanted to fly to Vancouver and look through the UBC graduation book."

If they can't know who their biological fathers are, many offspring are refocusing their energies on finding half-siblings. Not only might they look like them, but they have probably experienced similar emotions along the way. Denver resident Wendy Kramer started an on-line sibling donor registry (<http://www.DonorSiblingRegistry.com>) in 2000 to search for information on her son, Ryan. Offspring register the known details of their fertility clinic and donor and hope to find matches. When Wendy and Ryan appeared on Oprah, the membership spiked the next day.

In an Internet-literate world, kids looking for their fathers and siblings can log on every day after school. The site, which has about 5,000 members, including some donors, has facilitated more than 800 matches, most between siblings, but some between offspring and donors. Most of the "members" are under the age of 5, which suggests a massive wave of curious DI kids on the way. That is, if parents want to be honest. On the registry, Ryan, at 15 years old already an aerospace engineering college student, found two sibling matches. "But it was bittersweet. The mother has chosen not to tell the girls they are DI. But I have been able to see pictures. It's unbelievable how much we look alike."

Through the Kramers' offspring registry, Kristen has learned that she may be related to at least three other girls. "We suffer from the same heart palpitations and we have the same moles. I've met one of them. I'm the only one who hasn't submitted my DNA because I'm uncomfortable with it."

How do the donor dads feel about all this? David, a London, Ont. teacher, started donating sperm in 1975. He is perhaps the best-case scenario when it comes to the kind of man donor offspring imagine. To the public, he would prefer to be anonymous. "I was a blood donor. I thought maybe if people need blood, they need this," he says. "I called the clinic and asked if they had a program. It's probably the most embarrassing thing I've done. But it felt really good to do it."

He has several of his own children from two marriages and has chosen not to tell them they may have a number of half-siblings. But he's in favour of openness with DI kids. He has never been contacted by anyone who suspects he may be their father. But he has left a letter at the clinic explaining himself to potential offspring.

He disapproves of payment and thinks the government might have done a better job getting the word out about donating before the Assisted Human Reproduction Act took effect. "I wanted to be a donor, not a vendor," he says. He declined payment at the time and imagines that it would be terrible to know that your father was a "money-grubbing university student."

Like many women who chose DI, Pam Beatson says her donor "sounded like somebody I might date." Others were too jockey. Hers liked art and literature too. "I like art and literature and I'm getting into sports," Sage pipes in.

Now four years after her crying jag, Sage says her sad feelings are gone and she doesn't want to meet her sperm donor dad. She has even found a silver lining to all the Father's Day hoopla. Asked about tomorrow's special day, she tears out of the room, not in angst, but to retrieve the painted wooden

box all the kids at school decorated for their dads. "I get to keep mine. Everyone else had to paint them with golf balls and stuff," she says, wrinkling her nose.

In the first study to examine the feelings and experiences of adolescents who had been conceived through "open-identity" sperm donors, U.S. researchers found that all but one of the 29 young people involved had a neutral or positive response to their origins. More than four in five said they were likely to ask for the donor's identity and try to contact him, but few saw him as being an important person in their lives and not one reported wanting any money from him. The top question the young people wanted answered was: "What's he like?" Of the 83 per cent who wanted to know their donor's identity and to contact him, the motive for the majority was curiosity about him and, for many, the chance to see if it would help them learn more about themselves.

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