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A Sperm-Biz Overhaul

A new era of openness about reproductive options is shaking up an industry based on donor anonymity.

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A few months ago, Si'mone Braquet, 41, of Sugar Land, Texas, and Tim Gullicksen, 41, of San Francisco, found each other on the Internet. Braquet was searching for the sperm donor who'd allowed her to become a single mom 10 years earlier. Gullicksen, an anonymous donor intrigued by his own family tree, was looking for his "kids." First there were e-mails and phone calls. Then, in March, Gullicksen flew to Texas to meet Braquet and the child they created: a boy with bluish-green eyes and sandy brown hair named McKay. When Braquet told her son that she had tracked down his donor dad, "he lit up," she says, then burst into tears. For years, McKay had kept a "Daddy Box" under his bed filled with special handmade items—a painted rock, an angel ornament with his photo in it. Finally, just weeks before his 10th birthday, he had someone to give it to. "I've always wanted a dad," he says.

For decades, sperm donation was a secretive affair. Donors were all anonymous, doctors acted as sperm brokers, parents kept mum, children never knew they weren't biologically related to their fathers. Today, America's reproductive culture is far more open. Single women and straight and gay couples buy eggs and sperm themselves, using pictures and audiotapes of donors to narrow down their choices. Donors like Gullicksen, who thinks he has at least 35 offspring, seek out their progeny. Kids like McKay meet the men who gave them half their genes.

This openness has shaken up the largely unregulated multimillion-dollar sperm-bank industry, which is built on anonymity. For years, it has focused solely on sperm donors and the women they get pregnant—not the offspring they produce. Even today, sperm banks don't count or document the children born from the sperm they sell. (Their most recent estimate: 5,000, plus up to 10,000 born from donor eggs.) Donor files are lost when clinics go out of business. And the health of donors, who may develop inheritable diseases later in life, is not tracked. Now, after years of debate, three of the nation's largest sperm banks—California Cryobank, Xytex Corp. and Fairfax Cryobank—are proposing the first national registry of sperm and egg donors. The industry has "gotten the message loud and clear," says California Cryobank's Dr. Charles Sims. "We have some role and responsibility to do this."

But the proposed registry is raising critical questions: Should donors be allowed to remain anonymous? Do children have the right to know their biological roots? Today, many clinics offer "open" donors, who agree to be contacted by offspring when the child turns 18. But clinic leaders feel passionately about protecting donor privacy for the many who want it. Eliminating anonymity, they fear, could scare donors away. The industry's goal is to create a voluntary, highly secured nationwide repository for records. Sims believes it should include the names of sperm and egg donors, when and where they donated, and the names and birth dates of children they produced. But there are differences of opinion about how specific to get (donor names or just their ID numbers?). And details regarding access, oversight and cost have yet to be hammered out. The American Society for Reproductive Medicine is assessing the plan carefully. "Who's going to decide whose perspective will prevail?" asks ASRM president Dr. David Adamson. "Do the rights of uncreated children supersede the rights of a fully mature adult? I'd suggest no."

Wendy Kramer, whose son, Ryan, was conceived with donor sperm in 1989, believes the kids

matter most. "The No. 1 goal should be to serve the needs of the family, not just protect the anonymity of donors," she says. In 2000, Wendy and Ryan launched the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR) online. Using donor ID numbers, children, parents and donors are finding each other and, at the same time, exposing what Kramer calls the "chaos" in the industry. "We've got one donor with over 100 offspring," she says. Kramer believes births should be tracked on a mandatory basis, sperm banks should be recruiting only open donors, and a child's innate desire to know where he comes from should be honored. So far, the DSR has matched more than 5,000 children with others who share the same donor. Ryan, who lives in Boulder, Colo., connected with half-sibling Anna DiBella, of Kingston, N.Y. Several hundred other children, including McKay Braquet, have found their donors. "These kids deserve to know the truth," says Kramer.

They may benefit from knowing more about the long-term health of their donors, too. Last year Kelly, a 41-year-old egg donor who doesn't want her last name used, lost her mother to colon cancer and her grandmother to Alzheimer's. She believes children conceived from her eggs deserve to know that. Kelly says she tried to contact the clinic she donated to 17 years ago to update her file, but got no response. Sims says the new registry will likely include a place for medical updates. Kelly says, "It would be negligent not to."

Tim Gullicksen and Si'Mone and McKay Braquet, meanwhile, are getting to know each other. Though Gullicksen has no legal or financial obligations to McKay, he wants to be part of his life. McKay phones Gullicksen every day. They're planning a vacation to Disneyland together. "That's my kid and I'm there for him," says Gullicksen.

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