Donated eggs, sperm create complex relationships

By Carol Ostrom
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SEATTLE -- At 7, Nora and Emma don't understand all the science it took to create them.

What they do understand is that there are two very important women in their lives:

One is Mom: Carrie Carpenter, the white-haired, gentle woman who gave birth to the beautiful, blue-eyed fraternal twins when she was 47.

The other is the woman they call their Egg Mom: Lorraine Wilde, the tall, brainy college teacher who was once a strapped grad student convinced her smart, healthy genes had hit a dead end.

The two women never met at the fertility clinic where Carrie received Lorraine's eggs. There, in an industry that depends on donated egg and sperm, the watchword is "anonymous."

Through small, meaningful gifts and notes passed through the clinic, they corresponded. Anonymously. Finally, through a card with a phone number, blacked out carefully by the clinic but faintly discernible when held to the light just so, Carrie and Lorraine met.

Over the next five years, the two forged a friendship, intertwining their families.

Lorraine and her husband, Mike, who now have bright, bouncy 3-year-old twin boys, include the girls on their Christmas cards; Nora and Emma pinned the boys' photos on the family-picture wall at school.

Together for the boys' birthday, the kids hug and play while the moms catch up.

A few months after they first met, Carrie wrote again to Lorraine: "It is so important to me to know you and to have Nora & Emma know you."

Even so, Carrie acknowledged her fear. "Part of me feels

like this is that dangerous territory when you fall madly in love and think, 'Is this real?' I guess what is so powerful is the fierce (and I don't think possessive) love we both have for Emma and Nora."

It's a relationship that often prompts questions from acquaintances. "I say, 'Several years ago, I donated some of my eggs; I have a relationship with the girls who were born from that,'" Lorraine says.

Together, Carrie and Lorraine are pioneers in openness. The alternative, secrecy, wasn't a good fit for either.

Carrie recalls a childhood friend who grew up with an older "brother" who was really her father. "The whole town knew, and she didn't." Carrie's own father, adopted twice in the 1920s, died

Photos by Erika Schultz/Seattle Times

Twins Emma (left) and Nora are part of an increasing number of children born with the help of egg donors. The girls and their mother now have a special and very rare relationship with the girls' "egg mom."

Carrie Carpenter (left) and Lorraine Wilde share a laugh over family pictures with Carpenter's twins, Nora and Emma Carpenter gave birth to the fraternal twins when she was 47, with the help of Wilde's eggs.

without knowing his genetic origins.

"The girls have said, 'If we didn't know Lorraine, that would be our deep, dark secret,'" Carrie says. Instead, "They know there's always going to be that relationship."

In a clinic high in Seattle's 1101 Madison Tower, reproductive endocrinologists Lorna Marshall, Lee Hickok and Diane Woodford ride the crest of rapidly advancing technology: In the past few years, success rates have skyrocketed. Now, Hickok says, a patient at Pacific Northwest Fertility who receives two embryos created with donated eggs has a 75 to 80 percent chance of getting pregnant the first time around.

Newer procedures have nearly eliminated the need for donor sperm for male-female couples, the vast majority of those who visit this clinic. Now, for most, it's all about eggs.

In the past decade, egg-donor recruitment has risen sharply, along with donor payments. The Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology estimates that 9,000 donor-egg children were born in the United States in 2005, a number that has risen steadily over the years.

At Marshall and Hickok's shop, egg donors are paid $4,500, considerably below what's offered at some agencies elsewhere in the country, some of which routinely pay up to $10,000 for repeat donors. In the case of "exceptional" donors with particular ethnic, scholastic and physical characteristics, agencies have paid much, much more.

Key in this process is the availability of eggs, and the women who donate them.

Hickok and Marshall say it's essential to protect the rights of donors. These young women generally care deeply about helping other women, Marshall says, but most want to stay anonymous. "Once they give the eggs, they are done."

Maybe. Maybe not. The cautionary tale here features the children of sperm donors. Now old enough to have minds of their own, they have followed a grassroots path worn smooth over decades by adoptees, demanding to know their genetic origins. They have rights, too, these offspring insist. Armed with Internet connections and scraps of information, they are tracking down their donors.

But who are these sperm donors to their offspring? Are they like blood or bone-marrow donors, offering spare cells? Are they providers of genetic potential, like great-grandpa's legendary fast pitch? Are they "fathers"? Or something else, someone who doesn't yet have a name?

Parents may minimize the contribution of "just a donated cell," says Wendy Kramer, a Colorado mother who began Donor Sibling Registry in 2000 to help donor-conceived half-siblings connect with one another and their donors. "But to these kids, it's one half of their genetic ancestry. It's half of who they are. Just because you feel one way, it doesn't mean your kid is going to think the same way."

Most offspring of donor eggs are still too young to be on the hunt. But no one expects them to be any different than the offspring of donor sperm, or, for that matter, adoptees.

At the very least, donor-conceived offspring and adoptees face common medical and genetics issues, notes Mark Demaray, a lawyer who specializes in adoption and assisted reproduction.

Times are changing, say many in the infertility business, but not without some angst.

"As attitudes have shifted with adoption and donor sperm, we're starting to see more of that with donor eggs as well," says Dr. Angela Thyer at Seattle Reproductive Medicine.

Ultimately, the same psychological needs that pushed open adoption may well drive more donors and offspring to establish relationships. But for that to happen, patients must demand some mechanism for contact. Moyer says her only concern at the time was to have a baby. "I never really thought, 'Is he going to want to know what his donor father's genes are like?'"

Now, an increasing number of patients are beginning to think about "later," says Rita Bender, a lawyer who specializes in assisted-reproduction contracts. And some donors, too, are leaving the door open.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine advises parents to tell children "the facts of their conception" and, if parties agree, donor identity. It also urges clinics to maintain records as a "future medical resource" for the children.

Clinics say they lack staff to update records or locate donors, and are restricted by contracts and privacy laws. Most donors, they add, don't want contact, satisfied with making a little money or doing a good thing. Recipients and offspring, some say, most often want information -- a need that one California egg donation agency satisfies by giving recipients digital videodiscs of donors talking about their lives -- not a relationship.

In several other countries, demands for access to donor information have prompted mandatory registries.

Critics argue that such moves, and even voluntary connections, can frighten donors and raise prices, along with opening a Pandora's box of questions: What if a donor becomes obsessed with the child, or the child with the donor? What if the mother and donor are at complete odds about what is best for the child?

"I honestly don't know what the right thing is," says Dr. Victor Fujimoto, director of University of California, San Francisco's in vitro fertilization program. "This is one big social experiment, isn't it?"

Dr. Lorna Marshall watches an ultrasound screen while transferring two embryos into the uterus of a patient at Pacific Northwest Fertility in Seattle.