

THE Daily Telegraph

Suffer the little children

By Anita Quigley

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EARLIER this year Americans were gripped by the story of Justin Senk, a Colorado teenager. Until his 15th birthday, he led an unremarkable life as an only child.

Then his parents told him he was conceived using donor sperm.

Like most teenagers he had a natural curiosity and went to the internet for answers. What he found was a string of siblings.

What was most remarkable (and caused most the consternation) was his four brothers and sisters lived within a 25km radius of him - five children born to three mothers who had fertility treatment at the same clinic, using sperm from a man they know only as Donor 66.

Critics argued that, given the children were of a similar age, it was not inconceivable two could unwittingly find themselves in a sexual relationship.

Justin's discovery - courtesy of [donorsiblingregistry.com](http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com) (<http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com>) - was soon superseded by another case in Virginia, where 11 women came forward after finding out their children were all sired by the same man (in this case, Donor 401).

The most children linked to any one donor in the US so far is 22.

This, say the founders of the website, is the tip of the iceberg, which is why these stories have deep implications in Australia.

Such is the shortage of anonymous donors in NSW, many fertility clinics are either closing their books creating years-long waiting lists.

Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital fertility clinic closed its books for the first time in decades and Reproductive Medicine in Albury is considering doing the same.

Program co-ordinator Ruth Keat says the clinic has 83 women waiting for sperm and, given it is highly unlikely they will be able to meet that demand, they are considering closing the list.

"We can't continue to have 83 women ringing up every month when we don't know when, or if, we can help them," she said.

Until 2004 the Albury clinic, like most, had donors on demand. Now they have none.

The sudden decline is being attributed to a push for disclosure laws which will enable children to make contact with their biological parents.

Since July 1, 18-year-olds in Victoria conceived with donated egg or sperm can be contacted by their donor - the only jurisdiction in the world to allow this.

NSW lags behind, with the Assisted Reproductive Technology Bill still under consideration, according to Health Minister John Hatzistergos.

Victorian donors can also be contacted, if they are willing to be identified - but that only happens if parents tell children they were conceived by design and the children decide to track them down.

The decision must be consensual.

It is estimated only 30 per cent of donor-conceived Australian children know it.

About 50 to 60 per cent of the women waiting for donor sperm in Australia are single - women who, as Fay Weldon said in a recent newspaper article, find themselves approaching 40, childless and partnerless and "deafened by the sound of the biological clock".

There's no doubt these are difficult times for thirtysomething women. The longing of motherhood is a real and heart-breaking problem for many.

But is a gynaecologist wielding a syringe the answer to the so-called baby hunger that overshadows so many women's lives?

There is no denying most single mothers are short on time and money. Plus, there are many benefits of two parents - not least the possibility one can stay at home.

Some would argue that, with love, children can muddle through all sorts of situations. But where you come from is who you are. The voices from the stolen generation attest to that.

As donor-conceived Kirsty Taifolos, 21, recently told an SBS documentary: "I find myself looking for myself in other people all the time."

It seems the use of donor sperm is about the dreams of would-be parents. What about the needs of the potential children and their right to know their biological families?

Although set up in the US, the donor sibling registry lists fertility clinics across the world, including 10 in Australia.

Under one Bondi Junction clinic, a donor has posted details, in search of his offspring and, at another, an offspring has posted his/her details in the hope of finding their biological father.

In the US, sperm donors are paid. Payment here is illegal.

To me, that begs the question, Why would a man want to donate his sperm in the first place, especially for no gain?

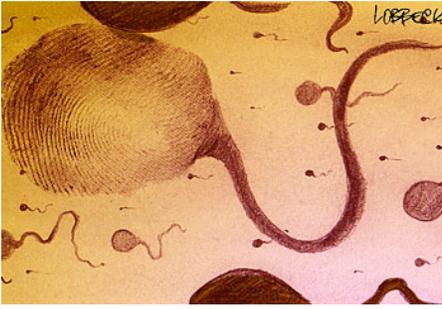
Perhaps it is just a cynical view of the world to think few men would do so solely for altruistic reasons when it seems everyone wants something for their efforts these days.

There is no denying the decline in donors has much to do with the threat of lost anonymity and the risk of financial and emotional involvement.

In the US, where donors remain anonymous, there is little chance Donor 66 will be found.

Sure, Justin Senk has four new siblings - brothers and sisters whose physical resemblance is striking and who share very similar interests.

But is that enough?



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