

Who's the daddy?

The five children in this article have three different mothers but the same father. But this is not a deadbeat dad story - they were fathered by a sperm donor. Suzanne Goldenberg reports on the growing number of donor children who are trying to track down their biological fathers

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The five - all blonde hair and blue eyes - are sitting like teenagers anywhere, slouched around slices of pepperoni pizza, shoulders hunched forward and arms folded into baggy sweatshirts, when Justin Senk sticks out his tongue. "I've got to check something. Can all of you curl your tongue?"

Justin can. Tyler Gibson can, and so can his younger sister, McKenzie. Rebecca Baldwin can. Her twin sister, Erin, cannot. "It's a lie, then," says Justin. "It's not a genetic thing."

Actually, as any biology student can tell you, it is a bit more complicated, as is the relationship between these five young people, sitting around the table in a suburban living room.

All share a father whom they have never met: an anonymous sperm donor who provided his services through a Denver doctor's office. They might never have known of each other's existence but for a website devoted to helping the children of sperm donors find each other, the Donor Sibling Registry, the first such venture of its kind. Before last summer Justin did not even know that he was the offspring of a sperm donor. But with a few clicks of his computer, he went from being an only child to the middle child of a large family - albeit one whose common ancestor has yet to be identified and whose members are still not entirely sure how to relate to one another.

Assisted reproduction was relatively uncommon when Justin and his half-brother and half-sisters were conceived, but it has become fairly widespread in the 15 years since he was born - and not just among heterosexual couples. There were 1.5 million births to unmarried women in 2004, and more of those mothers than ever before used donor insemination because they were in lesbian relationships, or were single and choosing to bring up a child on their own.

As single mothers gain increasing social acceptance - at least those who fit the new stereotype of the career woman who discovers maternal urges late in life - so have donor offspring in an age where fertility treatment is viewed as an increasingly ordinary process. And as is becoming apparent from the increasingly vocal community of donor offspring and the parents who have raised them, the need to find out about one's own genetic history is a powerful force.

Earlier this year, an American teenager used a swab of DNA and two internet genealogy sites to track down his biological father. That feat of detective work has reverberated through the donor industry, and has ignited a public debate in America about the rights of donor children and their donor fathers. On breakfast television and in internet chatrooms, donor children now in their 20s and 30s have

given emotional accounts of their search for identity.

Should they, and others encouraged by the enterprising teen, succeed in finding their donor, the potential implications for the American family are staggering. There are no official figures for the number of children born as a result of donor insemination in America. Aside from a requirement from the Food and Drug Administration for screening for diseases such as HIV, the donor industry in America is unregulated. Sperm banks and doctors' practices are under no legal obligation to record births, or limit how many offspring are born from each donor. Until fairly recently, some clinics did not keep records at all. Donor offspring such as Justin venturing out in search of their roots could well find themselves in a group of a dozen or more, all linked by the double helix of their DNA.

Men often remain in donor programmes for several years, typically giving two specimens a week, each of which may be divided into six or more units of sperm. At the present day rates for sperm donation, that amounts to a \$50 (£29) base rate for each specimen, plus \$20 for every unit that specimen produces, or about \$170 a time.

On the Donor Sibling Registry website where Justin has discovered his own expanded family, many of the postings list multiple offspring from the same donor. One of them, Number 647 at the Fairfax Cryobank (described as 6ft 1in, 170lb, with blue eyes and black wavy hair) has fathered 19 children in the last five years. He could easily have other children out there - not every live birth from donor insemination is reported, let alone posted on the web. More are almost certainly on the way. Several of the postings offer vials of Number 647's semen for sale.

Robert Aberdeen, a New York actor who was in a donor programme in the 1960s and 70s, believes he may have produced hundreds of offspring. "Maybe one day I will get all of mine in a room together - although it would probably have to be the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria," he mused. "I could have a thousand children, if not grandchildren."

Justin was the most recent donor child to surface in a group of half-siblings that now numbers five: Tyler, 18, twins Erin and Rebecca, 17, Justin, 15, and little sister McKenzie, who is 12. All live in the Denver area. The Gibsons and the Baldwins located each other late last year and had been in occasional contact by the time Justin turned up in July.

"When I first called Tyler on the phone, I was like, 'Hello,' and he said, 'Hello,' and it was like an echo of me," says Justin. "He sounded so much like me, it was creepy." Awkwardness gave way to mutual fascination once half-siblings met. They had the same eye and hair colour, similar noses and the same wide smiles. Their baby pictures looked so alike that even their mothers couldn't tell them apart. "We just kind of looked at each other, and said: 'Oh my gosh,'" says McKenzie. "You could almost immediately tell there was something between us."

It is more than just physical. All are bright and do well at school. Tyler and Rebecca lean towards the sciences; he will study astronomy and she molecular biology when they enrol at university next year. Justin, though he attends a high school specialising in the arts, is also strong in science and maths. They laugh at the same jokes. They like the same card games.

So what does that common DNA make them? Are they friends or siblings - or something in between? The five are still in the process of sorting that out. For Rebecca, finding another sister in McKenzie was like discovering a hidden piece of herself. "I feel this connection with her that maybe I didn't feel with my twin sister, Erin, because we have always been night and day," she says.

Justin, as the newcomer to the family, is the most expansive. "There is family, and then there is

family. It's a new definition," he says. "It's not like they are my cousins. They are my half-brothers and sisters. Think of the average family growing up with a mum and a dad, a brother and a sister, but finding half-siblings. How often does that happen, and in this way? The meaning of family has become different and expanded."

The Gibson-Baldwin-Senk family can trace its roots to February 1987 when Tina Gibson, a risk analyst who was then 29 and single, heard about a doctor in Denver who was open to helping unmarried women conceive babies with donor sperm. "I said, 'I just want a donor who looks sort of like me so the kid looks as much like me as possible'," she says. Her son, Tyler, was born in November that year. Some years later, she returned to the same clinic and received sperm from the same donor to conceive McKenzie. Unknown to Gibson, another unmarried woman in the Denver area was also contemplating motherhood. Sharilyn Baldwin was 36, and had recently left the US Air Force when she decided to start a family. The clinic that was treating Gibson was only two blocks away from Baldwin's workplace, and she was won over by the convenience. After several attempts, she delivered her twin girls, Rebecca and Erin in April 1988.

Meanwhile Susanne and Hank Senk had been trying for years to have children. By the late 80s, after a number of failed fertility treatments, their options to have a biological child of their own were running out. The clinic had a donor in mind. "They said he is a wonderful guy, we know this donor personally. They had sort of handpicked him, and used him before. I went in with a leap of faith," says Susanne Senk.

While Gibson and Baldwin told their children they were the products of donor insemination from an early age, Senk and her ex-husband waited until last June when Justin was 15. "He was totally mindblown," she says, "but in a happy way. I never saw him show any negative emotion over it, and I don't think he had time to dwell on it because he did find these half-siblings. For him, everything happened all at once."

To this day, none of the three women know much about their shared donor - although all three admit they are curious. The donor questionnaire identifies the biological father of the five as Donor number 66, a surgical assistant with above average intelligence, afraid of heights, fond of skiing, classic cars and woodworking, with no history of treatment for medical or psychological problems except for the period following the break-up of his marriage. "Temper after divorce," the form says. He would be 54 years old now. As unmarried women, Gibson and Baldwin were so relieved to find a doctor who would provide donor insemination that they did not inquire too closely into the donor's specifications.

The Donor Sibling Registry claims to have located at least 1,175 such half-sibling matches since its creator, Wendy Kramer, started the site five years ago, originally with the purpose of finding half-siblings for her son, Ryan, now 15. But finding half-siblings is only part of the story: for many, the next part of the quest is to try to discover more about their biological fathers.

Although other countries, including Britain, have introduced legislation allowing donor children to trace their biological parents, the majority of sperm donors in America remain anonymous. Women undergoing donor insemination generally sign a legal waiver, absolving the donor of financial responsibility for the upbringing of any child. They also promise to respect the donor's privacy.

Such promises of confidentiality, once given, cannot easily be dismissed, the sperm banks argue. What about the rights of the donor? Should they have to face the prospect, 18 years down the line, of donor children turning up on their doorstep, seeking money or a relationship?

Kramer argues that donor children have a right to know their parentage. "There are two sides here.

There is the donor's right to anonymity and there is the child's right to be curious, to know more about the invisible side of himself. What makes the donor's right to anonymity more important than the child's right to know?" She is also convinced from her own experience, and conversations with other mothers, that most donor offspring are simply looking for information about their biological identity.

"These kids don't want any money, and they don't want a daddy," she says. "They just want their questions answered."

Some donors are sanguine at that prospect. A few have subscribed to Kramer's site actively to seek out offspring, such as Mr Aberdeen. "At this point, I am not bothered by the spectre of answering the door and a thousand people there saying: 'Hi, Dad. College? Braces?'" But he certainly understands the feelings of those who want to guard their privacy, he says, for fear of causing damage to their own family.

Others now harbour an anger of their own at the medical establishment for failing to keep proper records of their donations. Dwight Jones, a software developer in British Columbia who was a sperm donor for 11 years, is to undergo DNA testing next month to determine whether he is the biological father of four women born through donor insemination.

"To just basically throw the records out of the window is to do a great disservice to the offspring," he says. "I think they have a legitimate right to know about their genetic heritage. It is important in these days of DNA technology to know where you came from and who your parents were."

As genetics assume ever greater importance in the treatment and prevention of disease, understanding one's own biology is crucial. There is also more public sympathy for those asking the questions. "People are going to want to know in 20 years all they can about their biological parentage in order to assist their own health, and to help guide reproductive decisions that they may want to make," says Arthur Kaplan, director of the Centre for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Kaplan also raises the frightening prospect that donor children raised with no knowledge of their genetic history could unwittingly marry a half-sibling. "Consanguinity - intermarriage of people who are genetically related - is not something that society should be tolerating, even inadvertently, but it has," he says.

Such pressures have begun to register on the donor industry in America. In the past few years, some sperm banks have cultivated donors who would be willing to be identified once the offspring turn 18, although they typically charge more for this service than for anonymous donation. Sperm banks also dispense more information about donors, sometimes even photographs. But they are careful to give away nothing that would allow their offspring to track them down, and there is resistance to adopting a general policy for disclosure. "There is always a lot of interest in finding out the identity of a donor, but if that were to become required, I think you would lose about 80-90% of your donor population," says Bill Jaeger, vice president of the Fairfax Cyrobank, one of the world's largest.

That has certainly been the case in Britain following the move to open donation. But Ken Daniels, a professor of social work at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand and a specialist on such issues, says that has not been the experience of Sweden, Australia, New Zealand and other countries, where donors have been asked to be prepared to be identified. "The main difference," he explains, "is that those who are prepared to be identified are older and therefore not so interested in money as a factor."

But while other countries in the industrialised world have moved towards outlawing anonymous donation, America remains attached to the notion of privacy. Eleanor Nicoll, a spokeswoman for the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, says that the prevailing medical culture in America favours privacy. "In countries where you have got a lot of public funding for medical care I think you have more tendency to see certain concerns being legislated," she says. But that is not the case in America where there is no national health system.

Understandably, concern for donor privacy registers differently among the five children in Denver than in the general population. Tyler turned 18 last month, and his younger siblings are pressing him to make inquiries about their father. They are all curious to see the man whose DNA they carry, but there is also a sense of ambivalence. "As eggs or embryos we don't make the decision not to know who our fathers are," says Rebecca. Then she rethinks: "We don't need a name."

"Just more background," says Tyler.

"Or even a picture," says Rebecca.

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