

Courier Mail

The dilemma of the D-Generation

- Jane Hansen
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Damian Adams, 36, from Flagstaff Hill, pictured here with his children Angus, 4, and Brydee, 7, is still looking for his sperm donor father. Picture by: Simon Cross

Source: The Sunday Mail (Qld)

Donor-conceived children are struggling with identity issues when they grow up.

FOR many new parents, holding a newborn baby for the first time switches on a light – a new generation born, a genetic baton handed down and the rhythm and hum of thousands of years of creation makes sense on a primal level.

But when Damian Adams held his baby girl, the light switched off.

"I held my baby in my arms and everything went black," the 36-year-old says of his now seven-year-old daughter.

Damian is from "Donation Generation" as he calls it, conceived via anonymous sperm to a loving infertile couple from South Australia who desperately wanted him.

"I was always really proud of being donor created, but once I had kids of my own, I realised what I had been deprived of," he said.

He is talking about kinship, the genetic bond most of us take for granted, but Damian feels adrift in a genetic void.

"I have a fantastic relationship with my parents, it was a loving home but things are missing, the things

that couldn't be provided – identity, heritage, history," he said.

It may be the subject of Hollywood pulp like current movie *The Kids are All Right*, where handsome sperm donor Mark Ruffalo arrives in the lives of a lesbian couple, played by Julianne Moore and Annette Benning, after their donor-inseminated children seek him out, but life for the real donor-conceived is no Hollywood script.

Damian does not know who his father is and says it drives him crazy. His parents were always upfront about his conception, but as was the norm in the 1970s, his sperm donor father was anonymous.

"When I look in the mirror, I don't know who that person is," he says sadly.

His feelings are echoed by dozens of donor-conceived children who have made submissions to the current Senate Inquiry into Donor Conception. Like generations Stolen and Forgotten, the Donation Generation, believed by Donor Conception Support Group to number about 60,000 in Australia, don't always feel lucky for the gift of life. Artificial creation may result in a much-wanted baby, but when the baby grows up, the adult wants answers.

"The bizarre twist is that we clearly recognise the tragedy when a conventionally conceived child has somehow had their biological father or mother separated from them through unfortunate circumstances.

"Paradoxically however, we are unable to recognise the same tragedy when a child has been half-donated," Adams said in his submission.

This tragedy is not something Caroline and her husband Patrice Lorbach from Blacktown, in Sydney's west, even considered when sperm donation became their only option for a family back in the 1980s. The couple conceived three children via anonymous sperm donors and feel they were not given enough information then to "fully understand the ramifications down the track". Their children – now 21, 18 and 15 – want to know who their donors are. To them, it feels like a basic human right.

"I don't feel unloved," Callum Lorbach, 18, says of his family. "I just want to fill in the blanks, mostly to do with health issues."

This is all the information the fertility clinic would give to Callum.

Callum's donor was born in 1947. He had been married and was now separated. He was between 175-184cm tall, weighed between 81-90kg and was of medium build. He had brown hair and brown eyes with a fair complexion. He was a boilermaker by trade and his interests lay in architecture and drawing.

"The information is pathetic," Callum wrote in his submission to the inquiry. "Hundreds upon thousands of people have the same appearance, etc. It doesn't really tell me anything about him as a person."

It is Caroline Lorbach who pushed for the inquiry because she could not provide the answers her children needed.

"At the heart of the parent/child relationship is honesty," she says, and what frustrates her and many donor children is that identifying documents on anonymous donors do exist but clinics will not give them up.

"I pushed for the inquiry to have the documents that exist be protected rather than legally destroyed," Caroline, 53, says. "We believe all donor-conceived children should have the right to know."

Since 2005, sperm donors are required to leave identifying information for their biological offspring to access at age 18. As a result, sperm donation dropped dramatically. In April this year, IVF Australia actually ran out and turned to internet advertising which attracted a mere 20 donors. Queensland Fertility has just four state-wide and only one in Brisbane.

"Our donor rate is abysmal," Queensland Fertility expert Keith Harrison says.

It is the reason why Brisbane mum Donna O'Loughlin sourced sperm from the United States. Her donor, an Atlanta fireman, has 56 biological offspring including her three-year-old son and unborn daughter. Her children will always know who he is.

For those born to anonymous donors before the changes, there is little or no co-operation.

Damian Adams has been told his donor's records have been destroyed and has embarked on a world-wide search for his father.

He has posted his face on searchingformyspermdonorfather.org in the hope his donor might recognise him and he registered with the Donor Sibling Registry set up in 2000 in the United States by Colorado-based Wendy Kramer.

Ms Kramer was sure that the curiosity of her own donor-conceived son Ryan was not unique, but she underestimated the numbers of the genetically displaced around the world.

Ms Kramer has matched 7846 donor half-siblings, 99 of them Australian – 315 Australians are currently registered.

"Donors, parents and donor-conceived people come to the Donor Sibling Registry looking to connect," she says. "Sometimes it's for medical reasons, but mostly it's because of curiosity and the need to connect with one's genetic and ancestral background. Australian clinics have used larger banks that ship worldwide. Donor-conceived people can have half-siblings in many countries throughout the world."

Sperm donors are not paid money in Australia, but it is big business in America. Many use the service as an altruistic way to pay off a university debt.

"The infertility industry pulls in more than \$3 billion a year," Ms Kramer says. "Sperm banks are about three things: making money, getting people pregnant and keeping donors anonymous."

California Cryobank is the biggest donor site in the US and the website, the ultimate in consumerism, offers a menu. Purchase individual items from an a la carte menu to download and/or print at your convenience.

Ordering individual items can get expensive, so be sure to have your choices really narrowed down before opting for the a la carte option, it says of the information you can purchase about your future donor. The a la carte menu includes facial features, temperament, childhood photos.

The site even caters for the modern obsession with celebrity with donor look-alikes! Ashton Kutcher and David Beckham look-alikes are on offer. Donor 12235 is popular now – he's 1.8m tall, has blue eyes and brown hair and loves his mum.

"It's Huxley's Brave New World, create your own human," Damian Adams says, alluding to the sci-fi novel of last century. "It's a marketplace and it degrades our humanity."

Caroline Lorbach adds: "It amounts to shopping for children. I find it incredibly distressing."

The fact remains, it is as easy as a click away. Europe's most prolific donor, Ed Houbin, is the biological father of a staggering 70 children. Eight more pregnancies are past their first trimester, he says.

He is father to two pre-schoolers in Australia as well, but the parents wish to remain anonymous. Ed, however, is upfront. He has been donating sperm for 10 years from his Dutch town of Maastrich and when he hit the legal limit at his local clinic, he went online advertising his service.

He's a one-stop-sire-shop for mostly lesbian couples all over the world, and not only does he do it for free, the personal touch is available as well.

"People are free to choose but as artificial insemination generally takes more cycles before success is achieved, most prefer a more traditional method, of course accompanied by mutual recent STD-tests," he says of nature's preferred method.

"I do always feel like I have to apologise for doing this. But if a couple or single woman has been used as a money source for the fertility clinics for years with no result, they might want some intimacy back in the miracle of conception," he says frankly.

By his own admission he is no oil painting, but his true beauty is that he will not shy away from his offspring.

"If and when desired, I am certainly OK with the children knowing me," he says. "I just visited a boy and his mum in Jerusalem. I think a child has a human right to know its origins."

Knowing who dad is, at least for his children, means they won't accidentally fall in love and marry a half-sibling, which is a risk for donor-conceived children from anonymous sperm and one of the issues the inquiry has been asked to consider.

"Doctors say its a minuscule risk, but they don't understand the stress the kids go through every time they meet someone new, wondering, 'Am I related to this person?'," Caroline Lorbach says.

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