

[朝日新聞デジタル Japanese](#) [朝日新聞中文网 Chinese](#) [Asahi Asia Antenna - 독자와 함께 Korean](#)



REPRODUCTIVE MEDICINE: The difficult search for roots and long-lost relatives

June 20, 2014  0

By TAKASHI EBUCHI/ GLOBE Staff Writer

While identity is something that grounds people and gives them a sense of place in the world, for some, it is by no means a given.

These include people born to mothers who were inseminated by anonymous donors because their husbands were infertile.

This group has faced a long struggle to trace its roots. However, this task has grown dramatically easier over the past few years, thanks to the Internet and the spread of genetic testing.

One man on a long journey in search of his roots is Bill Cordray, 68, an architect living in Salt Lake City, Utah, who was conceived using donated sperm. His mother told him when he was 37, after his father and younger brother had passed away.

He says the news didn't come as a total surprise to him, as he always felt different from his father since childhood. While his dad was a very physical man, Bill was often found with his head in books or gazing at art. He wishes his mother had told him earlier, though.

"I was very irate. For years I was sure she had been unfaithful to my dad and that had made me," he says.

A new question now presented itself: who was his genetic father? And so his hunt began.

His mother's doctor would only tell her the donor was a medical student who had graduated from the University of Utah in 1945. Bill got hold of the graduation roll and found 31 candidates. After trawling through medical journals and local newspapers, he managed to obtain photographs of their faces. There was no decisive piece of evidence, though.

He then read a book that said the mother's doctor was often the donor in these cases. Her physician was not among the 31 candidates, but Bill was convinced. He went straight to the doctor's house and blurted out, "I just want to thank you for my existence." Yet the doctor, now pushing 80, refused to admit Bill was his son.

Bill only recently managed to pinpoint the identity of his genetic father. In the autumn of 2012, he sent a saliva sample to a website that uses DNA to trace genetic ties. The service cost just \$100 (10,200 yen).

Through the test, he learned he had a male genetic relative living in Utah. This man sent Bill a detailed genealogy report, which seemed to indicate they shared a great-grandparent; a Norwegian immigrant by the name of "Sondre."

Sondre had moved to Utah in 1850 seeking to settle near his older sisters, who had married a Mormon. He sired 13 children and more than 50 grandchildren. But which one of these was Bill's father? Sondre's English name was written in small letters on the back of the genealogy report. It was the same family name as his mother's doctor, whose house Bill had visited. After checking on a website looking into Mormon lineages, he discovered the doctor was indeed Sondre's grandson.

Over the last six months, Bill has tracked down six half-siblings born from the same father but different mothers. He has also found two new cousins, a niece and a nephew. One of his half-sisters, 59-year-old Anne, is the spitting image of Bill, with the same clear, blue eyes and pale, chestnut hair. Anne routinely checks the DNA website.

"Every two weeks I get new relatives. It's overwhelming," she says.

There are said to be more than a million people conceived this way in the United States, with an additional 30,000 born each year. Many are born into well-off, white households. Sperm banks became more prevalent across the United States in the 1980s. Though donors were anonymous, they were given a number when donating, and donor-conceived children began using these numbers to track down their kin.

If a donor has an archived number, the donor-conceived child or their parents can use a website such as the popular Donor Sibling Registry (DSR) to locate other children conceived from the same sperm.

The DSR was founded by Wendy Kramer, 55, who lives in a mountainous part of Colorado in the western United States. Wendy herself purchased sperm from a major sperm bank and used this to conceive her son, Ryan, in 1990. As Ryan grew up, he became more curious about his genetic father. At every birthday, his wish was always the same: "I want to meet my dad."

While driving home from school with his mother in 2000, 10-year-old Ryan made a proposal. He suggested using an Internet bulletin board to see if he had any half-brothers or half-sisters out there.

The very first message was headed simply “Donor 1058?” Seven years later, he found a half-sister three years younger than him, and they arranged to meet in Central Park in New York. The first time Ryan laid eyes on her, he knew without a doubt who she was. He subsequently found two more half-sisters. The four of them now get together once a year.

He also discovered the identity of his father. After doing a DNA test, he found two other genetic matches registered on a DNA website. Both of these had the same last name. Undeterred, Ryan managed to obtain data from the sperm bank about the donor’s date of birth. He also discovered the donor’s birthplace, Los Angeles. He compiled a list of people born in Los Angeles on that day. Only one person on this list had the surname Ryan was looking for.

When he went to meet his father, he found an engineer who spoke with an intellectual turn of phrase. Ryan was also good at mathematics and had entered university to study aerospace engineering at age 14.

“His sense of humor was just like mine, too,” Ryan recalls.

On the plane back from the visit, Ryan said something Wendy will never forget. “Even if I never see my father again, it will be OK,” he told her, “because now I know where I came from.”

The DSR now has more than 43,000 registered members and has matched up 11,000 sets of parents and children or siblings. More than 10 sperm donors were found to have sired more than 100 children apiece, with one donor fathering around 200 offspring. Such cases significantly raise the risk of consanguineous marriages between their descendants.

DONOR-CONCEIVED JAPANESE SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH

The longing for identity is a universal one. Japan certainly has its fair share of people searching for their roots. After taking a blood test while training at a medical school, Hideaki Kato, 40, a doctor in Yokohama, discovered his father was not a blood relation.

“It felt like half of me had been snatched away and thrown into the wilderness,” he recalls.

His mother revealed she had undergone artificial insemination at Keio University Hospital, with the donor a student from the medical faculty. Kato compiled a list of approximately 400 third-year to sixth-year medical students from that time. He also found photographs of their faces in medical journals and so on. He met around 10 of these people, but none admitted to donating sperm.

This spring, Kato asked the hospital to disclose the names of donors, but it refused, saying there were no records remaining.

Japan’s first donor-conceived child was born in 1949. More than 10,000 children were born this way in the following 60 years.


These include Sachiko Ishizuka, 35, who was 23 when she discovered the truth of her birth when her mother told her after her father contracted a hereditary disease. With Kato and others, Ishizuka formed a group for people in the same situation, but only 10 have joined so far.

“Most donor-conceived people are probably unaware they were conceived this way,” she says.

The medical community has deep reservations with the idea of giving people the right to know their origins. If this right is granted, the argument goes, the number of donors will decline and this will hurt couples who can’t have children. However, Mari Saimura, professor at Tezukayama University in Nara and an expert in child welfare, believes the right to know should take precedence.

“It feels like a life-and-death issue for those involved. There is a kind of societal cruelty involved in turning a blind eye to their concerns.”

By TAKASHI EBUCHI/ GLOBE Staff Writer



Add a comment...

☒ Also post on Facebook

Posting as Wendy Kramer (Change)

Comment

Facebook social plugin