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Web site connecting children of sperm donors

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Dr. Kim Mulvihill reporting

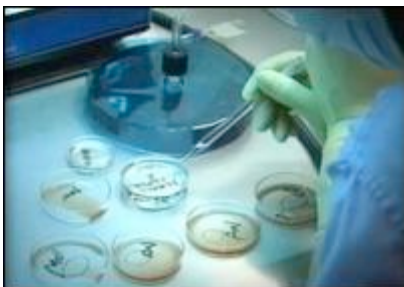
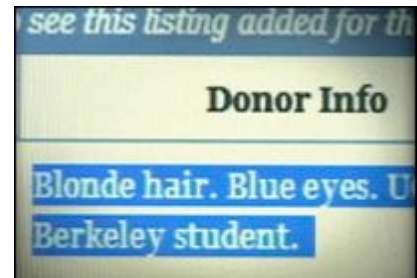
What happens if all you know about your father is a number on a vial full of frozen sperm? An Internet site is helping some people answer the question: who's your daddy?

Two-year-olds Claire and Liam Donohue of San Francisco have bounced into a brave, new complicated world. Just ask their mom, Jeanne. She says, "I bought enough vials to have a couple of children."

Jeanne is talking about vials of frozen sperm from an anonymous donor that helped conceive the twins. The details on "donor dad" include a batch number as well as vague traits -- northern European, tall, smart. The Donohues are now learning a heck of a lot more about the rest of their new, unintended, extended family. "We now know, including Liam and Clare, that there are eight offspring of the donor, and they're all over the country, and I'm in contact with two families."

They're once secret families, created by donor sperm, sold by sperm banks across the country. These secret siblings, born with the help of a common biological father, are now finding each other, thanks to the donor sibling registry. It's just a click away on the Worldwide Web.

Wendy Kramer created the Donor Sibling Registry. She says, "Some donors are a little fearful of coming to the Web site because they don't know whether they have two kids, five kids, 20 kids, or 100 kids."



Wendy created the site because of her own son Ryan's curiosity. Ryan was conceived with donor sperm. He says, "Growing up my whole life I had all these questions. You know when I looked in the mirror, I could see two distinct parts of myself. There were the parts physically, emotionally and intellectually that came from my mother's side of the family and then there was this whole half of me that came from this completely unknown source."

It was unknown because, unlike some countries, American sperm banks "bank" on anonymity. However, the Kramers found that by posting the sperm's batch number, donor siblings can connect.

"I know I have a minimum of 10 [siblings] and more likely probably 20 or so," Ryan said.

Wendy says, "We've helped match up well more than 5,000 people. And that's half-sibling to half-sibling, as well as donor

to offspring. And we've got now, I believe, about 750 donors on the Web site willing to make themselves be known.

It's more than simple curiosity. Some estimate that tens of thousand of babies are born each year in the U.S. thanks to donor sperm. That could be a problem if they share DNA. Bioethicist Katrinia Bramstedt, of CPMC, says, "You may have siblings potentially intermingling and potentially having relationships, if you know what I mean."

Dr. Bramstedt sees the benefits of a registry as well as ethical pitfalls. She says most donors do it for easy money, not for the notoriety. "A lot of these donors, I can tell you, they move on," she says. Often times they don't tell their spouse or their children about that. It's a whole secret part of their life.

While donors are medically screened at the time of donation, medical conditions can change, but they have no obligation to update families. Wendy said, "You should know if there are certain genetic traits, or risks, or medical conditions that are within your DNA, your genetic makeup that the families don't know until they come together, and they may find out that five of the kids have autism.

As for Jeanne Donahue, she's glad her twins are registered. When they're old enough, she'll fill them in about their complicated family. "Will honesty be the best thing for them? I don't know, but that's the approach I'm going to take," Donahue said.

The registry is also welcoming egg donors. While the process of donating an egg is more complicated than donating sperm, the practice may be responsible for roughly 8,000 new American babies born each year.