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Are the kids all right?

Tom Blackwell, National Post · Saturday, Jan. 29, 2011

During a decade of paid giving, Dwight Jones made hundreds of sperm donations, and figures he is now the genetic father of children numbering in "the double digits." It was all done anonymously but Mr. Jones, a Vancouver medical-device distributor, is anything but happy about that.

He argues the growing number of Canadians born with the help of a stranger's sperm or eggs have a basic right to know the identity of their biological mother or father. He has a unique perspective, having made the traumatic discovery in his 40s that the man who raised him was not his biological father.

"Nobody's got a right to disenfranchise people about their history. That's an abomination," he said. "When someone does this to you, they cut away half your family tree in one cut. It's gone. It's very draconian."

A Vancouver judge is now on the verge of ruling whether the offspring of sperm and egg donors do, in fact, have a right to learn about their genetic progenitors.

Fertility doctors warn that removing anonymity would erase an already sparse pool of Canadian donors. Donor-offspring activists dismiss their concerns, and both sides point to the recent experience in Great Britain, which outlawed anonymous donations in 2005, as evidence they are right.

Activists note that the U.K.'s donor numbers are actually rising now, helped by a non-profit group's saucy marketing, which once featured photos of buxom young women under the heading "Britons, we want your sperm." Critics say Britain's shortage of usable sperm is growing.

Underlying the debate is a call by some to shift focus in assisted human reproduction from caring primarily for the would-be parents, to heeding as much the interests of the children that result from treatments.

Making the system more open is a laudable goal, but simply removing anonymity would create major difficulties, says Dr. Alfonso Del Valle, whose Toronto fertility clinic, ReproMed, runs Canada's only sperm bank.

"You will have disastrous effects," he said. "It would wipe out completely the provision of donor insemination services.... We need to proceed with caution."

With the number of Canadians undergoing fertility treatment swelling yearly, so grow the ranks of children with at least one genetic forebear who is a stranger. The treatments now produce about 4,500 babies a year, many involving donated gametes.

The U.S.-based Donor-sibling Registry, a non-profit, online forum designed to help offspring find their bio-parents and half siblings, has 1,000 Canadian members. Of those, close to 400 have managed to make genetic parent-child contacts, says Wendy Kramer, the registry's founder.

Such families have even entered the cultural zeitgeist, with *The Kids are All Right* -- a movie about a lesbian couple whose teenage children seek out their sperm-donor father -- up for four Academy Awards.

A 2004 ban on commercial payment for gametes has left this country with just one sperm bank and about 40 donors, meaning about 95% of sperm used here is imported from the United States, where there are no such restrictions. Many sperm banks give donors the option of allowing their names to be provided to offspring, but laws in both countries allow donors to remain unknown if they choose.

Olivia Pratten was the product of one such transaction, sperm provided anonymously at a clinic in Vancouver where her mother underwent artificial insemination. And that is what prompted Ms. Pratten, 28, now a Toronto-based journalist, to launch her lawsuit challenging B.C.'s Adoption Act and arguing that children like her have a constitutional right to full knowledge of their heritage.

Justice Elaine Adair of the provincial Supreme Court is expected to rule on the issue soon.

But is it really so important for children mostly raised by loving --if not blood-related--parents to learn about someone whose only

role in their lives was to hand over a vial of bodily fluid?

Ms. Kramer never thought it was, until her son Ryan, now 20, became intensely curious about her anonymous sperm donor.

It is partly that yearning for identity that has prompted many jurisdictions in Canada and elsewhere to open up adoption records, once as closely guarded as gamete-donation information. There is even some anecdotal evidence that children missing a chunk of their biological roots can suffer from serious depression, said Juliet Guichon, a bio-ethicist at the University of Calgary who has just completed a book exploring the donor offspring's right to know.

"It's a very basic human desire to want to know where you come from," said Barry Stevens, a Toronto-based filmmaker who traced the search for his sperm-donor father in a documentary, *Bio Dad*.

There is also, of course, a more tangible, medical case for making the information accessible. While sperm banks do extensive testing and collect what medical information they can, they produce only a "snapshot" of donors' health, said Ms. Kramer. A survey she helped carry out, and presented recently at two medical conferences, found that many donors had discovered medical issues or genetic risk factors that would be relevant to offspring.

Despite a natural concern about paternity suits and the like, the evidence suggests there is likely little to fear when children and donors do enter each other's lives.

The Donor-sibling Registry has helped bring about reunions of 8,000 donors and offspring and the vast majority have been positive, often leading to lasting relationships, says Ms. Kramer. "They're not looking for Dad.... They're not looking for money to go to college, they just want to know where they came from."

In a study published last month by Ms. Kramer and researchers from Britain's Cambridge University in the journal *Human Reproduction*, all the sperm and egg donors surveyed by the group reported their encounters with genetic children had been worthwhile.

"My mom, who otherwise has no grandchildren, is thrilled with these additions to the family," said one sperm donor about the seven offspring he found.

As Canada awaits the Pratten ruling, which will have effect only in B.C., a number of foreign jurisdictions-- including Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands -- have already banned anonymous donations.

Those who fear Canada following suit note the impact of 2004's Assisted Human Reproduction Act, which barred donors from receiving any commercial payments -- and has all but dried up sperm supply here.

Most surveys worldwide conclude that a majority of current donors would not take part if anonymity was gone, Dr. Del Valle argues.

The picture seems more complex in Britain, however. The numbers did decline in the early 2000s amid talk that anonymity would end, to as low as 224 sperm donors and 921 egg donors. Since the law was implemented in 2005, however, the rates have generally climbed, to 396 sperm donors and 1,150 egg donors in 2008, according to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, though it is still not enough to meet demand.

"The numbers have increased, which is irrefutable," said Eric Blyth, a social work professor at Britain's University of Huddersfield who had pushed for an end to anonymity.

There is still a "salacious, seedy" perception about sperm donation but recent experience shows that many people are willing to help out those who cannot otherwise have children, much as some individuals give blood, he said.

Encouraging that urge is the job of Laura Witjens, a Dutch import who runs Britain's National Gamete Donation Trust and is determined to challenge her adopted country's innate squeamishness about public discussion of sexual matters. With a small budget, the Trust has conducted mostly online awareness campaigns that have grabbed media attention.

One controversial appeal used the tagline "Give a Toss," a double entendre which means "give a damn," but also refers to a British slang term for masturbation.

James Martin, an engineer in southwest England's Gloucester, agreed to donate two years ago after hearing a radio interview with a donor offspring whose identity issues sounded remarkably similar to his own, as an adopted child.

"There is a lovely feeling to it," he said. "I have helped 10 families achieve their dreams. That has got to be awesome."

Dr. Roger Pierson, a University of Saskatchewan professor and spokesman for the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society,

acknowledges that awareness campaigns like those in the U.K. might work here. But he wonders if Canada is ready for that. "I don't think we're going to see a billboard down at the Eaton Centre advertising for sperm donors," he said. "I think that would challenge the boundaries of good taste here."

Dr. Del Valle also says that, regardless of the apparent number of donors in the U.K., the number of procedures using donor sperm has dropped there recently, while imports of sperm and reproductive tourism have increased. In fact, he said he has had inquiries from British patients about buying sperm from his own bank.

Others argue that shortages in the U.K. are the result of inefficient use of the available donations, not a lack of donors.

Mr. Jones, 66, donated for a decade in the 1970s and 1980s. Only later did he discover that his own biological father was really a man with whom his mother had had an earlier relationship. He says parents -- as well as clinics and governments -- have an obligation to let children know the truth about their origins.

Through the Donor-sibling Registry, he has made contact with a 27-year-old man he believes may be his genetic son, now an actor in Berlin. If pending DNA tests confirm their suspicions, Mr. Jones, who has two adult daughters of his own, expects their reunion will be a success.

"It could be a joyous occasion ... even for an old hermit like me," he said. "In this type of situation, you have to be realistic. You don't pre-love your possible kid. But human bonding proceeds as it always does."

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