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Internet Connects Sperm Donors With Offspring

Web Raises Privacy Questions

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BOSTON -- Many children who were conceived with the help of a sperm donor are turning to the Internet to help connect them with their biological fathers.

NewsCenter 5's Rhondella Richardson reported Tuesday that every year as many as 100,000 women in the United States try to get pregnant through sperm donation. Women get the promise of a baby, while most men are promised anonymity. The Internet could make that promise of privacy a thing of the past.

For donor-conceived Aaron and Leah McGhee, of Somerset, Mass., a videophone connected them with their dad in California. But 28-year-old Harvard University law student Rebecca Hamilton never met her biological dad. She's the child of a sperm donor who was promised anonymity.

"I started telling Aaron and Leah they had a donor from the time that they were born. I think that we were incredibly lucky because he wanted to have a social relationship with them," said Rachel McGhee, Aaron and Leah's mother.

Hamilton is not so lucky. She was so consumed by the need to know her father that she produced a documentary and has spent countless hours sleuthing on the Internet.

"I think anyone who is adopted knows what it is on an emotional level to need to know your identity," Hamilton said.

NewsCenter 5 subscribed online to Donor Sibling Registry, a Web site where sperm donor children hope to find answers. The donors are grouped by sperm banks and identified only by numbers. Many find half-siblings, but children actually find the name of their biological fathers.

Two years ago, Mike Rubino, donor No. 929, replied to a message that Rachel McGhee posted on the Web site. Against the odds, Aaron and Leah found their genetic roots.

"I didn't expect to ever know who our donor was, and I wouldn't want people to look at my story and think, 'That's going to happen for me now.'" McGhee said.

For McGhee, it's information that's too important not to know.

"You've got to insure that you have that information available for the children that you are bringing into the world, because otherwise you are making a predetermined choice to deny them their genetic history, and that's just not fair to do," McGhee said.

"Donors need to be aware that promises made today probably can't be held inviolable going forward," bio-ethicist Dr. Jeff Etker said.

Hamilton's documentary led to a change in New Zealand laws. Only donors who agree that their offspring can contact them when they turn 18 are accepted. Britain, Switzerland and Sweden have the same mandates.

In Boston, a few clinics have started giving donors the option to identify themselves when their children turn 18. Six states already have laws protecting donors from legal and financial responsibility.

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