

Contact with donor siblings a good experience for most families

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How do you describe a group of people who share little except the DNA of a British chemist who donated his semen 50 years ago? Are they a family?

Barry Stevens hesitates before answering.

"We're sort of a new kind of family," the Toronto filmmaker says. "We have a common experience. We've been through something together. And we share part of this man. ...

Clan is the word I'd like to use."

The story of how Mr. Stevens's clan came together is chronicled in his film *Bio-Dad* (airing tonight on CBC Television), which documents his quest to find his biological father and others who were conceived using the chemist's sperm.

Similar searches and reunions are happening across Canada and other countries as children conceived using sperm and egg donors seek one another out on the Internet and through detective methods despite policies meant to keep donors' identities secret.

Now, researchers are starting to look at what happens after connections are made.

A study published this week in the journal *Human Reproduction* found that donor siblings, their parents, and in rare cases the sperm or egg donors themselves often end up creating new forms of extended families, even in cases where the initial aim of the search was simply to feed curiosity or gather health information.

"We hadn't thought that the nature of the experiences of families were going to be so positive," said lead author Tabitha Freeman of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge. "They form bonds."

The researchers analyzed online questionnaires completed by 791 parents of children conceived using donated sperm or eggs who were registered on the Donor Sibling Registry, a U.S.-based website that facilitates contact between families who share the same donor. The parents included 37 Canadians.

The breakdown was 39 per cent lone mothers, 35 per cent lesbian couples and 21 per cent heterosexual couples. Most parents (91 per cent) lived in the United States, but 5 per cent lived in Canada, and the rest resided in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Israel.

Most joined the registry either out of curiosity about their child's physical or personality traits, or to give their child a better sense of his or her own identity. About 73

per cent ended up finding

one or more donor siblings; 63 per cent made contact with that child or its parents, and 23 per cent met in person. Of those latter two groups, the majority said they kept up regular contact.

Most of the parents called their experience positive. Some mothers even reported a maternal bond toward their child's donor sibling, despite having no genetic connection. One kept pictures of her child's donor siblings on her fridge.

A small minority (less than 1 per cent) reported a negative experience, mostly because the parents disagreed with each other about how the relationship should proceed.

The findings do not surprise Wendy Kramer, who founded the Sibling Donor Registry in 2000 to facilitate her son's search for his donor and donor siblings.

"We have been waving our arms and shouting this stuff for years," said Ms. Kramer, a co-author on the study. "The industry doesn't put any weight on it because it's all anecdotal."

She hopes that the research will inform policy changes in countries such as Canada and parts of the United States, where donors have the right to remain anonymous and fertility clinics are not required to keep or share a donor's medical records.

Those laws are under review in Canada, and last year Olivia Pratten, the offspring of an anonymous sperm donor, filed a lawsuit against British Columbia's attorney general and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia claiming that the anonymity law discriminates against donor offspring.

While Mr. Stevens has no plans for a sequel, his story continues: He could have hundreds more half-siblings out there, he says.

He has already made several lasting relationships. An English man named David, the first half-sibling Mr. Stevens met almost a decade ago, is his best friend. He keeps more spotty contact with others, spread out in England and North America. They've had a couple of reunions as a group, once at a picnic in London.

"There's a real deep satisfaction in meeting a genetic relative," he said. "You get to see a bit of yourself in the mirror. You get to see a bit of familiarity. And I think that's really important."

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