

Who's your donor?

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Olivia Pratten sat in the fertility doctor's office, determined finally to learn the missing half of her genetic heritage.

The 19-year-old had known since age 5 that her biological father was an anonymous sperm donor. Since then, she had wondered about him. Which of his traits had she inherited? Was that him on the bus – the man whose dark hair and blue eyes matched hers? Why did he sell his sperm for \$50 in June of 1981?

Ms. Pratten watched Gerald Korn, owner of the Vancouver clinic where her mother was inseminated, write a few notes on a piece of paper: Caucasian. Light brown hair. Blue eyes. 5 foot 10. Sturdily built. Blood group A positive.

Dr. Korn refused to reveal anything more about the donor – no medical history, no age, no name.

"I felt invisible," recalls Ms. Pratten, now 25 and living in Vancouver. "What happened to his records? My records. Was there any obligation at all?"

In a word, no. In the more than two decades since advances in fertility medicine began allowing women to conceive using donated sperm and eggs, tens of thousands of children have grown up knowing only half of their genetic heritage.

In Canada, it is illegal for fertility clinics to disclose the identity of a donor without the donor's written consent. Clinics are also under no obligation to store a donor's records.

That means that offspring have no way of retrieving information about the genetic diseases possibly lurking in their DNA.

Now, a growing number of critics are lobbying to change that law. They argue that a child's right to know should outweigh a donor's right to remain anonymous. In recent years, those arguments have

lifted the veil of secrecy on donor identity in other countries, including Britain.

"Donor anonymity is one of the weakest links in the Assisted Human Reproduction Act," said lawyer and author Maureen McTeer in her keynote address at an international conference on new reproductive technologies held in Nanaimo, B.C., this May. She argued that the law, passed in 2004, creates "destructive secrets in families."

Meanwhile, donor offspring are following a path already forged in past decades by adoptees, arguing that they have a right to know their whole genetic identity. Armed with the Internet, scraps of information and easily available DNA tests, they are tracking down their sperm-donor fathers and their half-siblings.

"It's this primal urge," says Ms. Pratten, who now runs an online group helping to connect the estimated 1,500 children conceived through Dr. Korn's for-profit fertility clinic from the mid-1970s to 2002. "You just want to know."

Wendy Kramer started the largest of these websites – DonorSiblingRegistry.com – hoping to locate genetic relatives of her now 17-year-old son, Ryan, who was conceived using donated sperm. Since 2000, the site has ballooned to about 8,700 active members. Ms. Kramer says the site has facilitated 3,615 connections between half-siblings and donors.

"Nobody's looking for money, nobody's looking for daddy," says Ms. Kramer, who lives near Denver. "These kids are just looking to know where they came from."

Still, some argue that, without laws to hide their identity, donors will stop contributing out of fear that some day dozens of offspring will come calling. One donor on Ms. Kramer's website has been linked to 63 children. Another is linked to 22. "He's a bit nervous," Ms. Kramer says.

But Ms. Kramer points out that they are among the 500 donors who have signed on as members. She says many are older, have raised their own children, and are now "curious."

They include Dwight Jones, a 63-year-old Vancouver resident who donated about 400 sperm samples at Dr. Korn's clinic during a 10-year period beginning in the late 1970s.

Mr. Jones says he donated mostly for the money – \$30 to \$60 for each sample – and most of that time, he didn't consider the children being conceived using his donated sperm.

But that changed after Mr. Jones's own failed quest to meet his father, who had disappeared when Mr. Jones was born, helped him to understand the urge to know one's roots. So far, he has taken several DNA tests with donor offspring, including Ms. Pratten. None have matched.

"I'm sure I've got kids in the double digits running around out there," Mr. Jones says. "That doesn't make me some kind of monster."

Research out of the University of California has shown that, for many grown donor offspring, a relationship with their donor dad is only a bonus.

Most, like Ms. Pratten, are curious about their biological father and the traits they may have inherited, says psychologist Joanna Scheib, who interviewed 150 donor offspring who came of age under the Sperm Bank of California's open donor program, which allows offspring to contact donors after they turn 18.

Others just want access to the donor's medical files, she said.

Irene Ryll and her husband, Peter, struggled to conceive for years before trying donor insemination at an Edmonton clinic. Today, the couple have three children, ages 13, 11, and 8, all conceived using sperm from the same donor.

The couple's quest to locate the donor intensified after their oldest son was diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome, a genetic condition.

They wanted to know more about the donor's medical history – or at least share medical information with other families who used the same donor.

They've only been able to retrieve basic information from the Edmonton clinic: height, weight, complexion and eye colour. Still, the information "seemed like gold," Ms. Ryll says, "because it was something."

Ms. Ryll and others, including Ms. Pratten, have lobbied the Canadian government to adopt a system of open donation for sperm, which is already in place in part of Australia, in New Zealand and in several European countries including Britain and Sweden.

The Canadian lobbyists achieved a small victory when Ottawa passed new reproductive legislation in 2004. It laid the groundwork for a new registry that will give those who are conceived using donated reproductive material access to the donor's medical data. It may also connect donors and children if they both consent.

But the registry is still under development and may not come into effect for years. Even then, it will not include donors of those children already born, such as Ms. Pratten.

Dr. Korn retired and closed his clinic in 2002, a year after Ms. Pratten's visit. Dr. Korn said in an interview that he would never reveal donors' identities to their offspring without consent. Both Ms. Pratten's mother and the donor signed documents agreeing that the donor would remain anonymous, he pointed out.

As for his records: "Eventually they could be destroyed," he said, "because I have no legal obligation to maintain any medical document."

Next month, Ms. Pratten will begin a master's degree in journalism at Columbia University in New York. Unless her donor hears about her efforts and comes forward, she has little hope of finding him.

"I've done everything that I could do," Ms. Pratten said.