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150 half-siblings? Sperm donation creates superfamilies

By Madeleine White

Critics say sperm banks need to be regulated to prevent accidental incest and a shrinking gene pool

Imagine telling a child that she is the product of a sperm donor. Now imagine telling her that, also, she has up to 150 siblings.

A piece in The New York Times [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/06/health/06donor.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all&src=ismr_ap_lo_mst_fb] examines the growing trend of half-siblings across the United States as sperm banks dole out copious amounts of samples from the same, popular donors.

Not only does this cause concerns for scientists – who worry about a shrinking gene pool and the possibility of unnatural propagation of rare genetic disorders – but also for parents who suddenly realize that their family has grown exponentially.

One unforeseen consequence is that accidental incest is a real possibility. One mother has informed her daughter of her donor's number in case the girl ever decides to become intimate with another sperm-donor child.

"She's been in school with numerous kids who were born through donors. She's had crushes on boys who are donor children. It's become part of [her]sex education," the unnamed California mom said.

Critics [<http://feministing.com/2011/09/06/should-artificial-insemination-be-regulated>] see this as one of many reasons why sperm banks need to be regulated legally. (In Canada there is some regulation [<http://www.ahrc-pac.gc.ca/v2/index-eng.php>], including a national registry of personal health information [<http://www.ahrc-pac.gc.ca/v2/cp-cai/phir-pris-eng.php>], but no legislation saying how many children one donor can sire.)

As Slate writer KJ Dell Antonia

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2011/09/06/when_one_sperm_donor_can_father_150_children_or_more_something_n.html] put it: "Somewhere along the line, someone really didn't think this through."

These elaborate extended family networks are being discovered courtesy of the Internet, as more and more mothers head to sites such as the Donor Sibling Registry [<http://https://www.donorsiblingregistry.com>]. After the shock wears off, these sites can have a positive impact. One group of five families [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/parenting/pregnancy/conceiving/seven-children-six-mothers--one-anonymous-father/article797660>] met with their half-related children for an event that was "like a family gathering with people you've never met."

But who is the one person not sitting at these picnics? The virile father. Though, as The New York Times article revealed, some of these men are equally shocked when they find out their biological offspring tally is in the dozens.

Do you think governments limit how many samples from one donor a sperm bank can sell?

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