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ASRM: Pressure Builds for Open-Identity Sperm Donation in the U.S.

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SAN FRANCISCO, Nov. 14 -- Studies of people conceived with donated sperm suggest that many do not support the practice of anonymous sperm donation. Roughly a third of people who know they were conceived by open-identity sperm donors make a request for the donor's identity by the time they turn 20, according to the world's first study on this subject.

However, it is likely that other offspring will make the request at an older age, predicted Joanna Scheib, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis.

"Genetic relatedness is important to these offspring and there was some urgency for this group to learn the identity of their donor within the month that they turned 18, when self-identity is developing," she said at the annual meeting of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine.

"But there is likely to be two kinds of requester. If there is any analogy to the adoption literature, there will be another group who will be looking for information when they are older, with children of their own."

The findings add perspective to the changing landscape of sperm donation in the United States, said Dr. Scheib. Currently most U.S. donors are anonymous and most offspring are not told how they were conceived, "but identity-release programs are on the rise, with about one-third of U.S. programs offering this option to offspring once they reach adulthood," she said.

Pressure from donor-conceived offspring to eliminate sperm donor anonymity has contributed to this change worldwide, with some European countries legislating against anonymous sperm donation altogether. The United Kingdom implemented such a law in 2005.

Dr. Scheib's study included 142 offspring, ages 18 through 25, who had been conceived through the open-identity sperm donor program at The Sperm Bank of California.

Among participants, 125 had been informed about their means of conception, and out of this group, 39 (30%) had requested to know the donor's identity.

The majority of them (82%) had made the request as soon as they turned 18, and all but one of them asked for the information before age 20.

Female gender was the only significant predictor of desire to know the donor's identity ($P=0.05$), with 59% of requesters being female.

However, family structure also appeared to be an influence -- 44% of requests came from participants raised by single women, compared with 34% from those raised by lesbian couples, and 20% from those raised by heterosexual couples.

Action Points

- Explain to interested patients that most donor-conceived children want information about their donor's identity.
- Note that this information was published as an abstract and presented orally at a conference. These data and conclusions should be considered to be preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

At least half of adults went on to contact and meet their donor, reflecting interviews at information-release.

Another study presented at the meeting suggested that desire for identifying information about sperm donors is also important to offspring conceived via anonymous sperm donors.

The study included 85 volunteers from an online support group for donor-conceived offspring. Most participants (86%) were conceived with sperm from U.S. sperm banks, and were between the ages of 30 and 40, said study investigator Patricia Mahlstedt, Ed.D., a psychologist from Houston Baptist University.

The vast majority -- 90% -- had received no identifying information about their donor, although the same percentage wanted it.

And almost 60% of the participants believed all sperm donation should allow identity release.

"They hope that providers such as sperm banks, physicians, and nurses will come to regard sperm donation as a positive option, with no need for secrecy, and that they will encourage the use of donors who provide identifying information," said Dr. Mahlstedt.

Disclosure about the nature of the participants' conception via anonymous sperm donation usually occurred at, or after age 18, she reported.

Although 40% of participants reported feeling "good" or "very good" about their means of conception, about a quarter felt neutral and about a third reported "bad" or "very bad" attitudes.

"It did surprise us there was no significant correlation between when offspring learned about their means of conception, and how they felt about it, because we in the mental health field believe that it's to the offspring's advantage to talk about these issues early," she said.

Wendy Kramer, who founded and manages the Donor Sibling Registry, an online database of almost 23,000 sperm donors, donor-conceived offspring, and parents, says delayed or non-disclosure of donor conception is potentially damaging for children.

In a study she conducted with a Cambridge University team, most people who are told in adulthood report feelings of confusion and betrayal compared with a third of children told at age 11 or younger.

When contacted about Dr. Scheib's study, Kramer agreed that, although interest about donor identity often peaks at age 18, there is another peak later in life.

"Many donor-conceived offspring say that they only had a mild curiosity until they had kids of their own. It was at that time that their desire to know their roots became significant."

Dr. Scheib's study was supported by the Gay & Lesbian Medical Association: Lesbian Health Fund and the UC Davis Consortium for Women & Research.

None of the researchers declared any conflicts of interest.

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