

'It's a human right to know' your father

Canada is establishing a registry to collect health information

By JOHN MINER

The 23-year-old University of Western Ontario business graduate says he never suspected his birth was anything out of the ordinary until his grandmother revealed a closely held family secret.

"She looked me square in the eyes and said, 'Your dad is not your dad,' " said Rob, who didn't want his surname used to protect family privacy.

From his grandmother's slip in an unguarded moment last year, Rob was stunned to learn he was conceived with a sperm donation at the fertility program at University Hospital in London.

"I thought I was Scottish. I could be Jewish, who knows? I would really like to know what ethnic background I have," he said.

Rob now wants to know the identity of the sperm donor, but especially wants to find out if he has any siblings.

"They are out there. There is no chance one donor only did one donation. I am 100-per-cent sure there is something out there," he said.

But he's hit a roadblock.

His mother has told him the only information she was given about the donor was he was healthy and intelligent. The only other lead he has is he was conceived in July 1984 from a donation made at that time.

"I had curly hair as a baby, I'm five-eleven, have a strong interest in business and long-distance running, and I have brown hair, brown eyes. Maybe that will ring a bell with somebody out there who made a donation," he said, adding he can be reached at Rob_2009_@hotmail.com.

When he found a website set up to voluntarily link donors -- donorsiblingregistry.com -- with their offspring, there were only two entries from the London area, a donor and a man conceived by a donation.

Rob has now added his name to the registry. He hopes his story will encourage others to register, possibly giving him a lead, and he wants parents to tell their children how they were conceived.

"You really just have to trust you've done a good enough job with your kids that this is not going to be something that startles them too much. This is something children all deserve, all have a need to hear," Rob said.

Learning the way he has put a slight distance in his relationship with his mother, with whom he's always been close. He still hasn't been able to talk about it with his father.

"Secrecy in families can be very damaging. If something ever does get out it can put a strain on trust," he said.

In talking to his mother, Rob learned the advice she was given by doctors at the time was never to tell him.

If he ever finds the donor, the first thing he'd like to say is "thank you." After that, he'd likely ask a lot of questions.

"I'd like to get the story from him and what was going through his mind at the time."

He'd also like to know his donor's medical background. "If only to know if there's one certain type of cancer I should look for."

Although shocked to learn his background, Rob said he realizes a lot of people are conceived by pure accident.

"I was a deliberate choice. People went to a hell of a lot of time and money and resources to put me here. That is a comforting thought."

He also appreciates the tough choice made by his dad.

"To be a man born in the '40s and hear you aren't able to have a child and your wife still wants a child. To be able to agree to that in a different day and age, I can imagine how difficult that was."

Psychologist Christopher Newton, with the reproductive program at London Health Sciences Centre, said children have been conceived from donor insemination for more than 100 years and about 40,000 children a year are born in the U.S. in this manner.

In the London program, 152 babies were born through sperm donation between 2002 and 2006. But sperm donation has largely been shrouded in secrecy, even up to 25 years ago. Part of the reason was male infertility has been neglected in medical research, with not a lot of discussion.

"There have been a lot of myths around it, that a man was infertile because he was lacking in masculinity or virility or that he was experiencing

some sort of sexual problem. That made it a difficult topic to talk about," Newton said.

Also, some people viewed a woman inseminated with sperm other than her husband's as akin to having an extramarital affair.

And there was the fact sperm donation involved masturbation, a taboo topic until recent years, he said.

Sperm donations 20 to 25 years ago were all anonymous and the donor was assured the donation would remain anonymous, Newton said. Information that would have been recorded was limited to a few details such as height, complexion, hair and eye colour.

Sweden was the first country in 1986 to pass a law requiring donor information be collected and the identity provided to children. The U.K. passed a similar law in 2005.

Canada is now developing a national registry to collect health information on sperm donors. When it's operating, offspring will be able to contact the registry for non-identifying information. But identifying information won't be released without the donor's consent, Newton said. "Anonymity is still an option."

Rob maintains children should be able to know who their father is. "It's a human right to know where the hell you came from."