ARE YOU MY FATHER?

They were young, idealistic and often broke when they made their deposits Sperm-bank dads being sought by children they never knew.

By Nancy J. White. Toronto Star, Apr. 16, 2005.
http://www.thestar.com

His description read: Tall, blond, healthy. Member of university swim team. That's the guy Tonya Sabourin chose to help her have a baby. She'd read through more than a hundred anonymous donor listings from the sperm banks used by her fertility clinic. This man's medical history was good. His colouring was similar to hers. And, jokes Sabourin, "He seemed like the kind of guy I'd like to date."

Turns out he was a popular and productive choice, a good swimmer in more than one way. After her baby girl was born, Sabourin visited an Internet site, where she stumbled on two other children from that donor. She recognized the name of the sperm bank and the donor number. "It was like, Holy Cow, amazing,'" says Sabourin, 35, a child development specialist in Edmonton.

She emailed the mothers of those children, and they led her to several others. When a potential health problem arose related to the donor, Sabourin linked up with still more mothers on the Internet. In all, she's now in contact with parents of 11 half-siblings, all under age 2. But it doesn't stop there. The sperm bank, she says, has confirmed 30 known births from that donor, noted for his good sperm motility. And since not all births are reported, the number could be much higher. "I just wanted a child," Sabourin says with a laugh. "All this has been like an Oprah Winfrey show."

At first wary of all these half-siblings, the single mother now thinks her daughter might want to know them someday, to establish links with that genetic side. Sabourin hopes to meet two of the mothers and their children this summer. "This is all very new, very progressive. My daughter has a right to this if she wishes. There's more than one way to be a family."

It's a brave new world out there, and a convoluted one. For more than 50 years doctors have impregnated women with sperm from

anonymous donors, but it was always hush-hush. Frequently the children were never told about their genetic origins.

That's rapidly changing. More parents today are truthful about using donor sperm, and -- with help from the Internet and DNA testing -- more offspring are searching for, and finding, biological family.

One site, http://www.DonorSiblingRegistry.com/ boasts more than 4,400 registered members and 739 known matches of half-siblings. It started 5 years ago with a simple message in a Yahoo discussion group from a mother and her donor-conceived son who were curious about kin. "The site is growing exponentially, beyond our wildest dreams," says the mother, Wendy Kramer of Colorado.

But then what? What does it mean to have 5, 10, 15 -- or many more -- half-siblings? Without knowing who the siblings are, offspring often fantasize about strangers: Could he be related? Could she? They may even imagine the worst-case scenario: unintentional incest. If the siblings are known, there's a whole new set of relationships to negotiate. "It's fascinating but weird," says one Toronto mother of donor-conceived children who is aware of 9 half-siblings in the GTA. "Would we meet once, take pictures and move on?"

And what role does a genetic father play in someone's life? Could he be like a kind uncle, a wise elder? Or, maybe, a deep disappointment?

Most offspring will never know. In many cases, the donor will be forever anonymous, his identity locked away in old files. Some sperm banks will at least attempt to contact a donor, although addresses may be sadly out of date.

"It's been completely unregulated and unrecorded," says Roger Pierson of the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society. There were an estimated 1,500 to 6,000 donor inseminations in 1992 alone, research for the royal commission studying new reproductive technologies showed. With no mandatory reporting, no one knows for sure.

Practices will change. Enacted last year, the Assisted Human Reproduction Act, which bans payment for sperm, calls for a national registry of donors and offspring. But any information on identity will be released only with the donor's written consent.

Advocates of openness argue that's not enough. They point to a number of countries [Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, New Zealand & the state of Victoria, Australia] that prohibit anonymous donations. A new British law allows offspring conceived after April 1, 2005 to learn the donor's identity when they turn 18.

"It's unconscionable that we create a subclass of human beings forever denied knowledge of half their genetic identity," says Diane Allen,
executive director of the Infertility Network.

"Part of my birthright has been taken away," says Olivia Pratten, 22, an offspring activist denied knowledge about her donor. "There's a feeling of, `How dare you.'"

The forbidden information, the fight for disclosure -- it's very similar to what adoptees have gone through. "We're about 20 years behind adoption," says social worker Jean Haase, who counsels sperm recipients at London Health Sciences Centre. "But donor insemination is catching up quickly. The voices of the offspring will win out in the end."

Bobby Gerardot, a 51-year-old social worker, got the call from the sperm bank at home. He had an offspring, Katie Whitaker, who wanted contact. Was he interested? "It threw everything into chaos," says the Georgia resident, who had sold his sperm during the early 1980s. "It took a fair amount of soul-searching with my wife Lisa to decide on the next step, to ask her to write us a letter about herself and her motives."

The legal responsibilities are far from clear and may scare potential donors
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Whitaker sent a letter and photos. "When I saw them, I thought, `I'm screwed.' I could see myself in her. It was very emotional," Gerardot says in an interview. They met not long after. "They instantly hugged," recallsLisa. "The connection was immediate."

When he donated, Gerardot was in his twenties, a lab assistant attending night school, happy to help infertile couples and get $50 for each accepted sample. "I wasn't thinking about creating children," he says. "It was all so new and abstract, so sterile."

Whitaker found out she was donor-conceived when she was 16, a rebellious teen. Her mother confessed to clear the air, establish honesty. "I was glad to hear it," says Whitaker, now 20. "There was a reason I didn't look or act like my parents." She's more similar to Gerardot, she says, and he's helped her focus. "I call him Bobby, not Dad. He's very understanding with me. He's like a mentor."

She sees him about once a week. She and her mother, who was separated from her husband and eventually got a job offer in Gerardot's city, moved there. Gerardot and his wife welcomed the idea of an extended family for their two young sons. "We decided this had to be child-centred, to be about Katie and our children," Lisa says.

But happy endings are not guaranteed. "Donors and offspring could potentially be from vastly different value systems," warns Lisa, also a social worker. "Encounters could be difficult, even hurtful."

Now Whitaker wants to search for half-siblings. That's her right, Gerardot says, but leave him out. "I don't feel emotionally or physically capable of doing this again." Besides, he had 99 samples accepted. "I have this Night of the Living Dead vision," he jokes. "All these people walking like Frankenstein, coming at me saying, `Daddy.'"

Many donors are content to stay hidden, not to rock their current lives. Wives and children may be less than thrilled at the prospect of more progeny. But other biological fathers may wonder what happened. "Donors are not a homogenous group," says counsellor Haase.

Some even search on the Internet. "My hope was to give a gift of good
genetics," a mid-1980s Toronto donor says in a posting on one site. He's open to meeting any offspring.

But, legally, whose children are they? Are there inherent responsibilities?
Is an offspring entitled to part of the estate? These kinds of questions
worry potential donors, says Pierson, director of Reproductive Science and Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. "Our social laws haven't caught up to the technology."

A recent study in a medical journal, however, found that offspring are not after money or a heavy-duty relationship. The study looked at the feelings and experiences of 29 adolescents conceived with sperm from "open identity" donors, those agreeable to eventual release of their names. Most said they would try to contact their donors, motivated primarily by curiosity and to learn more about themselves.

"Mostly I'd just like to shake his hand and see what he looks like," says a 23-year-old woman, conceived with anonymous donor sperm in Vancouver. "I wonder about him every day." She wouldn't ask him why he donated: "I don't need to hear it was for the money." In high school, she was looking for a father, she says, now she's more concerned about medical history.

But she has a few details -- tall, brown hair, former philosophy student -- and many dead-ends in her search. Through the Internet and word-of-mouth, however, she knows of three women who are potential relatives. While she may never find the donor, half-siblings might compensate, she says. They could see what traits they share. "Those relationships could last a lifetime," says the woman, who grew up an only child. "It'd be amazing to have siblings." She's going ahead with DNA testing. "When I spoke to one of them on the phone, I started crying. I asked, `What do you look like?' and so much emotion came to the surface."

Toronto filmmaker Barry Stevens, whose documentary Offspring describes his donor search, has found 3 half-siblings so far. He met the first, a British lawyer active on donor sperm issues, when they

both gave blood for a DNA test. "It was a little weird," says Stevens, 52. "I didn't know if I'd like him." But while they don't look alike, they hit it off, with similar senses of humour, ethics and views of the world, Stevens says. They stay in touch and visit when they can. "I think of him as a brother."

More recent additions, the other two, a computer scientist and a journalist, also live in Britain, where Stevens was born. "I like them and feel good about having them as siblings," he says. "I hope to get to know them better." With a follow-up film in mind, Stevens is tracking clues on several more siblings, although there could be hundreds out there. The still unknown donor, likely dead now, spread his seed for more than 20 years. "As we grow," says Stevens, "I'd like to have reunions every couple of years."