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Sperm bank peddles celebrity look-alike donors

By [Hillary May](#) - The Washington Times

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Is it custom-designing a baby in the image of your favorite celebrity? The next logical step of the evolutionary desire for attractiveness? A silly result of sperm-donor anonymity rules? Or all that and more?

The Los Angeles sperm bank that began a celebrity-inspired Donor Look-a-Like service has raised eyebrows and hackles among champions and critics of artificial insemination.

California Cryobank launched the service in late July to allow clients to search for donors who best resemble certain actors, artists and athletes.

Wendy Kramer, executive and founder of Donor Sibling Registry, an organization that works to connect people born by sperm donation, said, "My first reaction was 'What? Celebrity look-alikes? That's the best they can do to get PR?'"

W. Keith Campbell, a social psychology professor at the University of Georgia, said the service also resembles a form of celebrity worship.

"I think it is clear that they are latching on to this huge trend in society which I call the democracy of celebrities," he said. "The big trends we've seen is that fame in terms of a goal or value has become much more important."

People may try to look more like their favorite celebrities by wearing replica jerseys of athletes or following stars' fashion styles, and this service is just a "thread of the larger fabric," he said.

Mr. Campbell said reality television, social networking sites and other trends only fuel the desire for fame and fortune. The service, however, "does make sense" and is not surprising, he said.

"I can see why a company would do this because it is getting people interested in the process," he said. "It seems like a good hook for people to go to their site."

Ronald Green, director of the Ethics Institute at Dartmouth College, said the service is not as "ill-guided as it might appear" and he does not see it as a "major issue."

Although it is difficult to grade attractiveness, Mr. Green said, parents want to give their children the best start in life and are simply trying to improve their chances.

"Appearances are a very important factor in sperm selection," he said. "I feel that people have tried to have attractive children from the beginning of time. We do that with our mate selection. We don't pick somebody that we don't find attractive.

"If the physical appearance was being sought to the exclusion of all other things such as character, intelligence and warmth, then I would really worry, but that is not what is happening here."

Scott Brown, a spokesman for Cryobank, said the service may appear to be "something that it's not" and insisted that it is not a "designer baby factory."

He said Cryobank's clients truly understand the reason behind the service and are not caught up with the idea of what the baby will look like.

"People's primary concern is having a healthy, happy baby, and the safety of the mother," he said.

Because donors remain anonymous, the service provides an easy and creative way to make the parents' difficult selection a more "humane process." Staff members carefully choose two or three celebrities who resemble a donor most closely, which Mr. Brown calls more of an "art than science."

Because of anonymity, he said, "this was the best way we came up with to show what the donor actually looks like."

And that is exactly the problem, said Elizabeth Marquardt, director of the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values. She said that although the Donor Look-a-Like service is purely a "marketing strategy," it wouldn't be necessary if it weren't for the clinic's assurance of anonymity to the donors.

The Commission on Parenthood's Future said in a report released this spring that an estimated 30,000 to 60,000 children a year are born as a result of sperm donation, although an accurate number cannot be determined because the industry is not required to report statistics.

The report, titled "My Daddy's Name Is Donor," studied 485 adults ages 18 to 45 who were conceived through sperm donation. The study shows that two-thirds of "donor offspring" believe they should know more information about their donor parent.

The issue also is reflected in popular culture. "The Kids Are All Right," an independent film released this summer, centers on a lesbian couple whose children find out about their biological father, who then tries to become part of the family.

Britain, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and Switzerland are among countries that have banned anonymous donation of sperm and eggs. Parts of Australia and New Zealand have done the same.

"Pretending the donor doesn't exist doesn't make life more simple to the child; it just makes it more painful," Ms. Marquardt said.

Ms. Kramer agrees. As a mother of a child conceived by sperm donation, she said, donor anonymity makes it difficult to receive medical information.

"Do you care if your donor looks like Ben Affleck if your child has a fatal heart condition?" she said. "It's a business and it's all about making money, hence the celebrity look-alike. Instead, they should be asking, 'How can we better serve the needs of the children being born? How can we be more accountable? How can we share medical information with families?'"

The goal of Donor Sibling Registry is to educate parents about sperm donation and to update and share medical information, she said.

"There are really serious medical and genetic issues that arrive from creating so many [children] from one man's sperm," she said.