

REFORM IDEA #6

ABOLISH ANONYMITY, EVEN IF IT DOESN'T SOLVE EVERYTHING

BY **KAREN,**
A **DONOR-CONCEIVED WOMEN AND MOTHER**

The emotional issues of people born of donor conception are not unlike those of adoptees. In fact, assisted reproduction has been recognized as a form of adoption, and incorporated into the American Adoption Congress mission statement: Through education and advocacy, the AAC promotes honesty, openness and respect for family connections in adoption, foster care and assisted reproduction.

Many proponents of assisted reproduction argue that we must learn to accept the emotional complexities of our birth as a condition of our existence and be grateful for what we have. This is true. We do not want to become consumed by our frustrations.

But all too often those of us who express feelings of loss or anger over having been born from assisted reproduction are considered selfish or ungrateful. We are cautioned that anything less than gratitude would hurt our parents and would be disrespectful to others who choose to form a family using these methods. Existential debt serves as a strong suppressant for many of our voices and concerns.

Each individual's circumstances and feelings will be unique. Several parents of donor-conceived children have stated in various online forums and in the media that their children have no interest in

knowing who their donors are. They point out that the well-adjusted and content donor-conceived people rarely speak up because it holds no interest for them.

And, of course, there are many people born from anonymous donors who are unaware of the nature of their conception. Of the ones who know, it is not surprising that some might not care, or say they are happy they were conceived under these circumstances. Some might not have strong feelings at the moment but may change over time. Others might find it too difficult to explore, or fear what they will find if they do. Some might wish they had never been told. Others might only want medical information, perhaps a picture. Some might want to meet half siblings or speak to their donors. Some might simply want them to know who they are. But for some, including myself, having a name, medical information, or being able to meet once or occasionally will still leave a void. Some of us with disenfranchised grief long for meaningful human connection with our genetic fathers.¹

I relate to, for example, the views of Wendy Rowney, a Canadian adoptee who advocates in the Toronto adoption community.² She wrote:

Many people will argue that this pain will disappear if we can only guarantee that adoptees and donor-conceived people can learn of their roots. There is no doubt that access to this information does help, but I believe that the pain stems from the dislocation we feel. Where do we truly belong? Nowhere. We find love in our families, but we can see that we are different. We may be lucky enough to find love in our [birth] families, but we were missing for so many years that we often don't truly belong there either. We are also coming to terms with the fact that our (genetic) parents...chose instead to give us away. In doing so, they also gave away our heritage, our ethnicity and our ancestry. These are not unimportant things. They matter. We have to mourn these losses. Knowing the

name of our (genetic) parent(s) doesn't make the pain go away and so I would argue that it is adoption/donation itself that causes this pain; it is not solely the absence of knowledge.

There is very little research that studies the experience and perspective of donor-conceived adults. Bill Cordray, a donor-conceived adult from the United States who has spoken and written about DI issues for nearly 20 years, has been compiling a Survey on the Attitudes of Donor Conceived People about Secrecy, Disclosure and Access to Information.³ To date he has had 91 donor-conceived adult respondents, ages ranging from 18-59.

He began the survey in 1999 as part of a presentation he had made at the 11th World Conference on IVF in Sydney, Australia. Participants were recruited from support groups and the Internet. He has since expanded on this survey to include many of the DI adults he has since met. The DI adults in his study come from the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

The results are fascinating but not surprising. In particular:

- 100% feel the right to know the donor's medical history
- 97% believe that children born from donors should be told
- 81% want to know the donor's identity
- 81% want to contact the donor
- 77% want to meet the donor and half-siblings
- 74% believe knowing as young as possible is best
- 58% of participant's parents are divorced

Out of the divorced families:

- 69% were told after their parents divorced
- 45% felt the secret played a role in their parents' divorce

Where do we go from here?

We know that genetic relation does not guarantee ideal parenting or family environment. But we also know that genetic connections are important anchoring points for an individual. Have we not

learned from the vast research and studies on the ramifications of kinship separation, or “genealogical bewilderment,” in the adoptive experience?

Why should an adult’s want for a child take precedence over a person’s need for meaningful connection with their full genetic identity, heritage and kin?

If nothing else, our country desperately needs to find a way to regulate the reproductive technologies industry to provide for the needs of the children as well as the parents. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, sanctioned by all 190 members of the United Nations except the United States and Somalia, acknowledges, in articles 7 and 8, the child’s right to know and be cared for by his or her parents and the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference.

Moving forward, donor anonymity needs to be addressed. Even though I recognize the complications it can bring to family life when contact with a donor is made in later years, as an adult I strongly believe it is my right to negotiate those connections.

1. I believe the United States should follow in the footsteps of the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Austria, England and Finland, which have banned the anonymous buying and selling of human sperm and eggs.
2. Limits need to be set on the number of offspring sired per donor. Every child born from these services need to be accounted for and clearly identified.
3. Payment for sperm, eggs and surrogates should be limited to actual expenses incurred.
4. The practice needs to work towards openness and honesty, identifying both the social parents as well as genetic parents on

birth certificates.

Reproductive technologies are here to stay, for better or for worse, but it desperately needs regulation to protect the interests of the people born from it who have no voice and no choice.

ENDNOTES

¹ Kenneth Doka, editor of the book *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*, defines this type of grief as emotion that is connected with a loss that cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. He says that in many cases of disenfranchised grief, the relationship is not recognized, the loss is not recognized, or the griever is not recognized.

Joanna Rose, a donor-conceived woman who has played an active role in the abolishment of donor anonymity in the United Kingdom, first wrote about this grief as it applies to the donor conceived in a paper titled, *From a 'bundle of joy' to a person with sorrow: Disenfranchised grief for the donor-conceived adult* (Queensland University of Technology Applied Ethics Seminar Series, 2001).

² Excerpted with Rowney's permission from a Yahoo discussion group, Donor Misconception.

³ Survey results shared with permission by Bill Cordray.