When Counseling Is Required

by Patricia Mendell, lcsw

Some clinics require people who are using donor insemination to have a session with a mental health counselor as a prerequisite. Many women are nervous about this, or take offense, especially if the clinic doesn't require the same counseling session with married couples. I have regular contact with some of these counselors, who are affiliated with the Mental Health Professional Group of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine. One of them, New York-based Patricia Mendell, offered this advice on the types of questions she tends to ask women. She says that although the interview might serve a gatekeeping function, similar to the home study in adoption, it is often psycho-educational in nature.

Her advice is to try to relax about the interview itself, and see it as yet another learning experience on your journey to motherhood. It not only reassures clinics that they are working responsibly with patients, but gives you an opportunity to talk things through, outside of your own head, in a kind of clarifying practice run before you start talking to family and friends.

Typical Questions That Might Be Asked (or that you can ask yourself)

• How did you arrive at the decision to use donor sperm?

• How do you feel about using donor sperm?

• Have you decided to use an anonymous or known sperm donor? Do you understand the differences (including legal) in these two choices?

• If you plan to use an anonymous donor, are you working with a sperm bank that will give you as much information as possible about the donor for your child’s sake?

• Are you aware that sperm banks make available different amounts of information?

• Have you given thought to using a donor that agrees to be identified?

• If you decide to have more than one child in the future, will you want to order more sperm vials than you need now so your children are full siblings?

• Is the clinic you are working with comfortable working with single women?

• Have you asked the clinic or the sperm bank the costs of storing sperm at their facilities? Unused vials cannot be returned when they are shipped and stored at the fertility clinic but can be repurchased at some of the sperm banks if stored there. Ask about the costs of shipping and compare costs.

• If you decide to use a known donor, are you aware of the issues both legally and emotionally? Have you discussed with the known donor the role he will play in the future in your child’s life? Are you comfortable with this role and is it clear?

• How does your donor's health history compare with your own?
Non-Traditional Family Building

- How do you feel about being single?
- How do you feel about getting pregnant in an unconventional way?
- On a scale of 0-10, how sure are you that this is what you want to do?
- Have you shared your decision with others, both family and friends, and what has been their reactions? Were their reactions a surprise to you? If yes, in what ways?
- Who will be your supports as you start this journey to parenthood? In what ways?
- Will you have any reactions from your employer on single parenthood?
- Do you have a job that will be compatible with becoming a parent? If yes, in what ways and if no, then do you have a plan B for work?
- What have been your thoughts on transitioning into parenthood?
- How do you expect to describe or define the donor to your child, family, friends?
- What kind of support system will you have from friends, family and work?
- Do you have financial resources for childcare?

What Ifs

- Would you be able to financially support multiples?
- What are your thoughts about multiples and the possibility of selective reduction?
- Does your health care coverage cover the cost of fertility treatments?
- Does your income cover extra medical costs?
- Do you understand your fertility potential; age, and health status?
- If you use IVF, what are your thoughts about what to do with leftover embryos?
- If you need bed rest, what financial and physical support would you turn to?

*Patricia Mendell is a New York City-based Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Board Certified Diplomate. She is Vice-Chair of The American Fertility Association (AFA) and the facilitator of the AFA Ovum Donor Seminar Series. She is co-author of the fact sheet for AFA on “Talking to Children about Ovum Donation.” She has written and spoken extensively about fertility, third party reproduction, parenting after fertility, disclosure, multi-fetal reduction, and pregnancy loss and adoption. She is an infertility and pregnancy loss survivor, and in her role as therapist and consumer advocate, she gives those seeking her help advice on how to cope better with stress, resolve marital tensions, choose single parenthood, and find solutions that will enable them to explore and access their family building options. She is reachable at 212-819-1778.*