



Sperm Donation Process

Moving Toward More Openness in Identifying Fathers

By Virginia Linn, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

ABOUT THE DONOR

Although anonymity rules at most of the nation's sperm banks, you still can learn enough about your donor to fill your child's baby book and more.

You can hear his voice on an audio tape. See his baby and childhood photos. Read essays written in his own handwriting. Learn about his favorite movies, books, music and hobbies. You can even find a donor who is a close match to your own facial features.

Meet Donor No. 3134, currently registered at the Sperm Bank of California.

He's 25 and is working toward his Ph.D. in computer science. He loves math, abstract thinking and logical arguments. "I love to learn about everything, be it the mechanics of the universe, the history of humankind, the psychology of my friends, the subtleties of swing dancing or the politics of sperm donation," he writes in his profile.

He's 5 feet, 8 inches tall, weighs 148 pounds, has medium brown hair, light-brown eyes, and is near-sighted. French Canadian in ethnic origin, he was born Catholic, but now considers himself agnostic. Several members of his family have been diagnosed with various cancers or digestive disorders. Among his athletic

skills, he's been a ski instructor and long-distance runner. He taught himself how to play the piano in high school.

At the Sperm Bank of California, he's agreed to be identified when his offspring turn 18. When filling out his personality and medical information, he said he learned a lot about himself and felt his offspring should know it, too. "Even if I have no idea where I will be in 18 years, I am pretty sure I would be happy to meet the child if it is his will."

It takes a donor several months to qualify for a sperm program. In addition to being screened for infectious and genetic diseases, he fills out personality tests and multigenerational medical histories. Because of the expense to the sperm bank for all these tests and reviews, donors must commit to a year or more and are required to submit a certain number samples, perhaps six, every month.

Nationally, donors are paid between \$65 to \$100 per vial. Most mothers use two vials per cycle, with each costing between \$250 to \$500, depending on how much information is released about the donor. Vials for open donors are more expensive than those from anonymous donors

-Virginia Linn

When Muriel White received a sperm donation from an Oakland clinic 26 years ago that led to the birth of her daughter, Alice, the clinic officials cautioned her not to tell her child. It was taboo. People didn't talk about such things back then. "I didn't go that route," said White, who was living in Greene County at the time. "I just didn't believe in lying to your children."

So she and her husband told Alice that mom and dad "had a little help." And when their girl developed an interest in dance and a knack for math as a teen, they openly attributed those traits to her genetic father. She's also the only blonde in the family.

Secrecy long has been the norm in donor insemination. But this is changing -- in some cases dramatically. Some countries now require that the identity of sperm donors be disclosed to offspring when they turn 18. England enacted a law to this effect on April 1, and some of the largest banks in the United States are introducing this option.

An unrelated case pending before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court raises troubling questions about whether a sperm donor is liable for financial help in raising the child. But most recipients choosing donor disclosure say they are seeking simply a picture of the man or more medical history.

White's daughter Alice, for instance, is now 25 and living in Tennessee. Recently married, she teaches dance and is going back to college for a master's degree in teaching. Alice White-Albright is curious about her medical history as she considers having children herself. So her mother recently placed a query on an Internet registry to try to track down the man they know only as Donor No. 46.

"It's a leap of faith to do donor insemination when you don't know the person," said April Ruby, executive director of the Sperm Bank of California in Berkeley, which pioneered the world's first donor identity program in 1983. The nonprofit bank was started a year before by a feminist health center to open up sperm banks -- which only served married women -- to single women and same-sex couples.

"At the time, there was hardly any information about donors at all," Ruby said. "You were lucky to get race and age and maybe his coloring." Much of the idea behind the secrecy was to protect whom Ruby calls the "social father," who may have been infertile. "Because most of the people coming to us did not have a social father for the child, they were planning to tell their children anyway about their origins."



Almost three out of every four donors on the bank's current list have consented to be identified when their offspring turn 18. Of the offspring, 20 percent have sought the identity information. According to a bank survey of 29 teenagers conceived by a donor, many plan to seek identity information later in their lives when they're not so busy with high school or college. At least two-thirds want a relationship with their donor.

Among other banks, the California Cryobank Inc., the country's largest sperm bank, introduced an open program a year ago and Genetics and IVF Institute in Virginia and Minnesota will start one this fall.

This summer, Cryobiology Inc., of Columbus, Ohio, which has a satellite office in Oakland called Pittsburgh Cryobank, began offering more information about donors -- current photos, a silhouette of their face or 15-minute audio tape of them answering questions -- but stops short of locking them into disclosure 18 years down the road.

They're asked only if they would agree to the potential of being contacted by the offspring. At that time, the bank would check to see if they're still open to this, but they can say no. No donor has agreed to go that far, but at least half of the newer donors have released extra information, said Donna Ridder, Cryobiology's lab supervisor in Columbus.

"In all honesty, I expected the donors to say 'No way,'" Ridder said. "I was pleasantly surprised." The nine-year-old Pittsburgh Cryobank is the only public sperm collection center in the region. A third of the company's 70 donors are from here.

Even before banks introduced open programs, many were releasing a wealth of information on the donor: pages of medical history, baby photos, results of personality tests and essays.

"We added a lot of depth," said Marla Eby, spokeswoman for Cryobank in California, which has centers in Los Angeles, Palo Alto, Calif; and Cambridge, Mass. "It's difficult to pick a person from a piece of paper. These are people."

DISCLOSURE FALLOUT

Reviews have been mixed in countries requiring disclosure. Sperm donations declined after Sweden and New Zealand imposed mandates a few years ago, but have stabilized.

A fertility clinic in Australia in 2003 offered Canadian university students a free trip to the country in return for their sperm, citing the difficulty in recruiting Australian men who didn't want to be identified.

In England, clinics that have actively recruited donors have kept up their numbers since the new law took effect in April, said Hetty Crist, spokeswoman for the Department of Health in London. "Where clinics have not modernized, they report numbers have dropped."

One or two clinics have tried to develop programs overseas to bypass the law, she said.

"In the UK, these clinics must be licensed and regulated by the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority to protect the safety of patients. Our advice to patients is to remain within the regulatory system."

Most believe the United States is not ready for mandated disclosure. "It's a complex situation," said Eby of the California Cryobank. "While donors are doing a wonderful, altruistic thing, it's difficult to know how they would feel about this 18 years from now. They may have a family of their own." The American Society for Reproductive Medicine believes donor identity is a viable option for some families, but should not be required, said spokesman Sean Tipton.

The disclosure wasn't an option at the Fairfax Cryobank in Virginia when a Monaca couple sought donations for their two sons, now 5 and 3.

The mom, Suzanna, 31, who asked that only her first name be used, has posted a query on the Internet in hopes of finding Donor No. 763.

This much she does know. He was a college student, probably in the Fairfax, Va., area, and his father is an orthopedic surgeon. He's of German heritage, and he played the bagpipes for five years.

She, herself, was adopted as a baby and tracked down her mother in McKeesport about eight years ago. She plans to tell her boys about their origins.

Neither Suzanna nor Muriel White has received a response to their Internet queries. But they remain hopeful.

"I guess it's more out of curiosity," Suzanna said. "I want to see if he looks like my children."