

'I just want to look my father in the eye'

Branded 'the donated generation', many adults conceived by donors are questioning their parents' decisions. Olivia Gordon reports

Joanna Rose's father, if he was still alive, would be perfectly within his rights to refuse to have anything to do with her. And officially, he couldn't be called her father, either.

He was a sperm donor at a Harley Street clinic for infertility in the early Seventies, a time when donor anonymity was the norm. Official records giving his identity have been lost or destroyed. And even if they existed, she has no legal right to know who he is.

Rose was first told by her family that she was sperm-donor-conceived when she was eight years old, "because it was thought the earlier I knew, the better".

Now 42, she had a "tip-off" about the identity of her biological father 15 years ago. She says that legally she cannot explain further, but it was someone who was said to strongly resemble her and to have donated prolifically at the clinic her parents used at the time. Her messages to the man in question trying to find out more were met with a solicitor's letter threatening legal action if she made further contact. She did not try to reach him again.

Not knowing her genetic identity has been "excruciatingly painful" for Rose. "It's so innate to who you are," she explains. "One of the biggest things I've ever wanted is to look my biological father in the eye." She describes her birthdays as "anniversaries of loss" that her father "wouldn't even know... and probably wouldn't even care about".

Rose, a social-sciences postgraduate now living in Devon, has spent much of her life battling for the rights of donor-conceived (DC) people. In 2005, largely due to her efforts, anonymity for sperm (and egg) donors – guaranteed by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) when it was set up in 1991 – was removed and DC children were given the right, when they were 18, to identify their genetic parents.

But the new law was not retrospective, and for Joanna Rose and the generation conceived "in the dark ages" before 2005, the change was too little, too late.

Around 2,000 DC children were born every year between 1992, when HFEA records started, and 2005, none of whom has the legal right to know the identity of their father (or in some cases, mother). Not all know they

were donor-conceived: in the past, secrecy was typical. (Even today, couples who use sperm or egg donors are not legally obliged to tell their children, although they are strongly advised to do so).

But many of those who do know now question the ethics of donor conception; some go so far as saying the practice should be outlawed.

"I don't think you could ever make donor conception a good practice," says Tom, a 32-year-old web developer, who runs a support group for DC adults, called Tangled Webs UK. "I'd like to encourage people to be more thoughtful about this whole issue. A lot of people don't want to think about it very deeply – they'd prefer to think that nice, smiling babies come out of this, and it makes

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everything OK."

No figures exist on how many children were donor-conceived informally, outside licensed clinics; but Dee (not her real name) was one of them. A successful thirtysomething Londoner working in publishing, she was 29, and had a six-year-old daughter when her mother told her out of the blue that her father wasn't her "real" father. Dee felt sick: "I felt intensely betrayed by her – like a science experiment, like the result of a transaction," she says.

Dee found out the truth almost by accident. One day she asked her mother – who had separated from the man Dee thought was her father – why he never signed cards and letters as Dad. "She paled and told me I had better sit down." Her mother told her that after trying unsuccessfully for a baby, they had asked a family friend to donate his sperm. "He handed it over in a condom during his lunch break." Dee had grown up knowing the friend, who died when she was 13.

His daughter was a friend of Dee's, and had known since childhood they were half-sisters and was sworn to



secret. She discovered that several other family members and friends also knew. "It was like I was in *The Truman Show*," Dee says.

Dee, like many of the "donated generation" as they call themselves, questions her parents' choices. According to a 2010 US study, called *My Daddy's Name Is Donor*, which surveyed nearly 500 18-45-year-olds conceived by sperm donation, "about half of donor offspring have concerns about or serious objections to donor conception itself, even when parents tell their children the truth".

The study also found that "young adults conceived through sperm donation are hurting more, are more confused and feel more isolated from their families. They fare worse than their peers raised by biological parents on important outcomes such as depression, delinquency and substance abuse. Nearly half are disturbed that money was involved in their conception." Some, says the report, fear "being attracted to or having sexual relations with



Joanna Rose, top, Octavia Cobb, above, and her twin, Harry

someone to whom they are unknowingly related".

Across the world, campaign and support groups for DC people have sprung up, and next month will see the first conference for DC adults, in



Melbourne, Australia. Such groups are demanding more awareness – by professionals and by those considering the use of donors – of the potential impact.

Activists are also critical of the fact that money changes hands: although in Britain, compensation for egg donors is usually capped at £750 and £35 for sperm, there is nothing to stop British people donating overseas for more money, while in the US donors can be paid uncapped amounts.

There is also unease about the issue of unknown half-siblings: in Britain, a sperm donor is limited to helping create up to 10 families of children, but in the

JAY WILLIAMS/STUART NICOL

US, there is no such limit – so there may be dozens or even hundreds of half-siblings from one donor.

The HFEA meanwhile, is about to launch a pilot support service for DC people, and how they feel when they grow up is a budding field of academic research. “We really want everyone who needs it to get the best help possible,” says an HFEA spokesperson. “When donor-conceived people decide to find out more about their donor, they may not be prepared for the sometimes intense emotions they will go through.”

Tom set up Tangled Webs UK in 2005, after discovering 11 years ago he was sperm-donor conceived. “My mother decided it was the right time to tell me, for no particular reason,” he recalls. Suddenly, “I didn’t recognise my own face. I didn’t know whose eyes were looking back at me. I had all this man’s features, I just didn’t know who he was – it was traumatic.”

With the clinic having no information or records on his biological father, Tom joined the Donor Conceived Register, a charity that aims to bring donor parents and children together through DNA matching. Remarkably, this method enabled Tom to be reunited with his father, who had joined. The reunion though, is exceptional – so far, only five parent-child matches have been made through the register since it was set up in 2004.

Father and son had a strong physical resemblance, and Tom felt they got on well. “He told me he didn’t have children of his own and had donated only once. He joined the register because he wanted to find out the outcome.” But his experience did not have a happy ending. He says: “I was looking for fatherhood figure, but he wanted to keep it distant.” The two met several times, but are no longer in contact.

Others tell a happier story. Students Harry and Octavia Cobb are, at 21, believed to be among the oldest egg-donated twins in Britain. They

grew up in Scotland, and their parents were open about their origins. Harry believes that family is about nurture more than nature. “Mum’s still Mum; I was still inside her, she raised me, she gave me everything I needed. The only thing that I don’t share with her is genetics, but it’s not that big a deal.”

Olivia Montuschi of the Donor Conception Network, which represents families with DC children, herself had two children thanks to sperm donation, and argues that third-party reproduction can work if parents are open. The key, she believes, is parents acknowledging the implications of their actions.

“Some children wonder, ‘Who is the real parent?’ It’s understandable. What’s important is that parents understand these feelings and don’t push them under the carpet.”

She says it is important for prospective parents to consider using only donors through licensed clinics, not by informal arrangement.

The HFEA points out that its licensed clinics may be able to provide prospective parents with information such as a donor’s ethnic group, physical characteristics, medical history and whether they already have children.

The infertile man who raised Rose as his daughter is now dead, but she says: “It’s easy to be seen as not compassionate about infertility or not loving the parents who raised you, but that’s unfair.”

Now herself a mother of two children, aged two and four, Rose would firmly advise any gay, single or infertile friends who want children to adopt or foster.

She is struck by the importance of genetics. “As a mother, I’m very aware that both nature and nurture matter, but I see my traits in [my children] – and I’ve got my [biological] father’s grandchildren, whether he likes it or not.”

www.hfea.gov.uk
www.tangledwebs.org.uk/tw/

Donor conception: children’s rights

● Before 1991, no regulation existed on sperm or egg donation. Records were not always kept by private clinics, and those that were may have been destroyed later. Donors were typically anonymous.

● 1991: The HFEA was set up to oversee fertility treatment, and all sperm and egg donors were guaranteed anonymity.

Their identity was

not recorded, although some details were, such as year of birth, height, weight and eye colour and ethnicity.

● 2005: Donor anonymity was lifted. The donor’s name, date of birth and last known address was recorded, as was their medical history.

DC children conceived after this date can apply at 16 for non-identifying information about

their donor, and at the age of 18 for their donor’s identity. The new law was not retrospective, but a voluntary register was set up for past donors to leave contact details so their donated children could trace them.

There is no legal obligation for parents to tell their children they were conceived by donor and it does not appear on the child’s birth certificate.