

My life was a lie ... now gaps on my birth certificate tell the truth about my father

The Daily Telegraph, juli 2014

TOM ROWLEY

A WOMAN who discovered that she was conceived from donor sperm has won a six-year battle to have the name of the man she thought was her father removed from her birth certificate.

Emma Cresswell, 26, still does not know the identity of her biological father. And on her new birth certificate, where his name, occupation and date of birth should be, the boxes are blank. Her surname, too, has been changed.

"It is not exactly an exciting piece of paper to anyone else," she concedes, carefully laying it on the coffee table in her living room. "But to me, it is. It is the truth. It is who I am."

Until last year, the document showed that her mother's partner at the time she was born was her "father" – even though he has no genetic ties to her.

Now, she has become the first donor-conceived Briton to have her "father's" name struck off the certificate. She has persuaded a court to order a new form because she does not share kinship with the man named as her father.

It took six years for Miss Cresswell, a paramedic, to have the certificate changed, and it was a highly personal decision. But it has important implications for the estimated 70,000 Britons conceived using donated sperm or eggs, whom Miss Cresswell hopes may now be inspired to follow her example.

The ruling is also likely to reignite the debate about if, and when, children should be told they were artificially conceived. Academics and professionals studying donor-conceived children have seized on the case to urge the Government to change birth certificates and include details of the child's genetic and legal parentage to encourage parents to be open with their children about their origins.

Miss Cresswell is one of triplets, born in Northampton in April 1988. Her mother, Susan, and her partner, Geoffrey Faint, were unable to conceive naturally, but her mother was desperate to have children.

The couple decided to undergo artificial insemination, a treatment where donated sperm is inserted into the womb.

After eight months of unsuccessful treatment, her mother became pregnant, and Emma and her two brothers, Ben and Daniel, were born. A month later, her mother and Mr Faint were listed on her birth certificate, but their relationship deteriorated. From the time they were toddlers until the age of 13, she had little contact with Mr Faint and was raised by her mother.

Miss Cresswell believed that he was her biological father, began to see him again as a teenager and moved in with him later to be closer to her college. Then, one night, she discovered the truth. "In the middle of an argument, Geoff decided to tell one of my brothers and me that we were actually donor-conceived and that he wasn't our father," she

'It came as a shock to us. We had no inkling as we grew up'

says. "It came as a shock to all three of us. We had no idea or inkling as we grew up."

The timing of the disclosure – after her first day studying paramedic science at Coventry University – was "not ideal". "It tainted the beginning of uni. I was trying to make new friends but I had so much going on."

Her brothers adjusted to the news, but she wanted to know the donor's identity, whether the man she had thought of as her father was telling the truth and why he hadn't told them previously.

Miss Cresswell and her brothers were born before the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority was established in 1991, meaning that she could not trace the donor.

But she joined the National DNA database, which will link her with her donor if he ever comes forward, or with half



siblings, conceived from the same sperm, if they, too, provide their DNA. Those born after 1991 can find out some information about donors, while those born since 2005 can find out a donor's identity once they are 18.

"I was quite intrigued by the fact I might have half siblings," she says. "Whoever my donor is might be quite an interesting person."

As well as searching for her biological relatives, however, she decided to distance herself from the man she had always thought of as her father. They are now estranged and she changed her surname to her mother's maiden name

within six months of his disclosure.

"I questioned myself as to who I was," she says. "I had thought I was one person for so long and then I found out that a whole side of that wasn't true. So I changed my name to represent who I actually was."

But there was still one anomaly: her birth certificate, which she needed to produce for job applications. Her brothers did not mind that Mr Faint was named as their father, but she found it odd.

"Each time I looked at it, I just thought: this is a lie, this isn't me. I wanted something that represented the truth."

She contacted solicitors to

inquire about changing the form, with no success. Eventually, however, she was introduced to Dr Marilyn Crawshaw, an academic with an interest in assisted reproduction, and Julia Feast, a research consultant at the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. Together, they sought legal advice and helped her prepare her case.

All assumed that it would be a long battle, and that, because the BAAF believes it is unprecedented, the case would be referred to the High Court. In the end, it was "easy", says Miss Cresswell. Her mother and Mr Faint submitted documents to Bristol county court

- close to her home in North Somerset - confirming that she was conceived by artificial insemination. Last June, a district judge declared that Mr Faint's name could be removed from the certificate and three months later the new document arrived.

"My friends know I've changed it, and that's enough," she says. "I am quite proud to have done it and hope anyone else in a similar position will realise it can be done."

But she thinks it would be much better if children were instead issued with a two-page birth certificate: the first showing the "parents" who are legally responsible for them,

and the second disclosing whether they were conceived naturally or not.

"It shouldn't have been needed at all," she says.

Together with Dr Crawshaw and Ms Feast, she is a member of the Birth Registration Campaign, which claims that the current system breaches children's legal right to a family life because they cannot contact their genetic family unless their "social" parents tell them they are donor-conceived.

Children conceived since 2005 are entitled to contact their donor, but would not know to do so unless they are informed of their origins.

"If my birth certificate was a true reflection of the situation, there would never have been a question of 'when shall we tell her?'" says Miss Cresswell. "They would have been encouraged to tell the truth earlier and maybe I wouldn't have found out in an argument."

Ms Feast claims that many donor-conceived children are never told about their background, or only discover the truth from a third party or by finding records after their parents have died.

"The birth certificate at the moment gives you nothing to go on," says Dr Crawshaw. "I know of people who believed they were at risk of genetically transmittable diseases because they thought the parents named on their birth certificate were their biological parents."

Miss Cresswell accepts that some parents will worry that disclosing this information could disrupt an otherwise good relationship with the non-biological parent, but thinks this is unlikely.

"If you tell them from the beginning, that can be a part of a stable family relationship," she says.

Looking back, she wishes she had been told earlier.

"I sometimes wonder why I can't just have a simple life," she says. But there are advantages in learning the lengths to which her mother went to give birth. "I wasn't an accident, I wasn't a mistake," she says. "I was wanted."

***'Each time I
looked at it
I thought:
this isn't me'***



②



Emma Cresswell, who was donor-conceived, hopes that others will be inspired by her six-year battle to have her birth certificate changed



3