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Needs of sperm donors, offspring at odds

By Kay Miller

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In the old days, fertility doctors told heterosexual couples using donor sperm to "go home, make love and pretend it's your child." It became the family secret.

Today, half of donor sperm recipients in some regions are single women or lesbians who need the donated sperm to conceive, and these women are pushing for more and better information as a wave of donor-inseminated, or DI, children come of age.

In fact, donor sperm recipients and offspring are calling for major changes in the nation's unregulated but multimillion-dollar sperm business - changes such as closer donor screening, creation of a nationwide medical database on donors, elimination of anonymous donation, limits on the number of offspring born per donor to as few as 10, and more honest counseling for donors.

"An estimated million Americans don't know the identity of their fathers who contributed sperm," said Mikki Morrisette of Minneapolis, mother of two children conceived with sperm that a friend in New York donated.

Morrisette collected evocative essays from DI children, a sperm donor, even an infertile father in her 2006 book, "Behind Closed Doors: Moving Beyond Secrecy and Shame," (Be-Mondo Publishing, \$12.95)

Among them is Ryan Kramer, a Colorado boy, who founded the online Donor Sibling Registry in 2000 with his mother, Wendy, hoping to find more information about his donor father. Since then, 7,209 people have signed onto the registry and 2,882 have made contact with half-siblings or their sperm donors.

"I'd like to see decisions being made on what is in the best interests of children being born," Wendy Kramer said. Up to now, policies mostly have been based on sperm banks' economic interests, donors' need for anonymity and recipients' desires to have children, Kramer said.

"We who run the sperm banks have failed to systematically respond to these children in a timely and sensitive manner," said Dr. Charles Sims, cofounder and medical director of California Cryobank, the nation's largest sperm bank. Sims believes sperm banks should provide better, more frequent updates on numbers of children born to every donor and facilitate the exchange of information between donors and offspring.

But he worries that the debate has become so skewed toward offspring rights that contractual guarantees of donor anonymity will be broken. "Many of these men are married and haven't even told their wives. It's not fair to strip them of any privacy rights involuntarily without notice or permission."

It has been estimated that 30,000 to 50,000 American children a year are born from donor sperm, but no one knows for sure, Wendy Kramer said. Record-keeping is spotty. Sperm banks send frozen sperm to a doctor, who then does the insemination. But it's up to the obstetrician who delivers the baby to report the birth to the bank. Only 20 to 25 percent do, Sims said.

More important is the need for a database tracking cancers, heart disease or other genetic conditions that have cropped up in the donor's family, Wendy Kramer says.

"We do an extensive amount of medical testing and record collection - providing much more detailed information than you would have on a spouse," said Suzanne Seitz, genetics counselor and communications director for Genetics & IVF Institute, parent company of Cryogenics Laboratories Inc. (CLI) in Roseville, Minn. Online profiles of donors are continuously updated, Seitz said.

Limiting the number of offspring or recipient families to as few as 10 is likely to drive the price up significantly as the cost of screening donors for genetic diseases is spread over fewer recipients, Seitz said. But the industry is responding to other expressed consumer needs.

"A lot of this is truly driven by what the public has asked us to provide," Seitz said. Last year her company, the nation's second-largest supplier of sperm, began offering ID consent donors at a premium: \$275 to \$445 per vial of sperm compared with \$190 to \$370 per vial for anonymous donors.

Under the ID consent program, donors agree that CLI can share their full name and contact information with offspring once they reach age 18, but are under no obligation to meet. The Sperm Bank of New York and California Cryobank offer similar options. But there are still relatively few ID consent donors - five of the 120 total donors on the CLI Web site in mid-January and 25 of the 145 donors on its sister sperm bank, Fairfax Cryobank.

"The big question," Wendy Kramer said, "is whether it's right to bring any child into the world who will never have the chance to know who their genetic parent is."

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