Children Of A Lesser Dad

Behind the amazing science of IVF lurks a profound but neglected question: what value do we attach to fatherhood? If it's just for producing sperm, then men may be sowing the seeds of their own irrelevance, argues Bettina Arndt.
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John Gonzales, a Catholic father of four girls, is surprised to find himself in the business of finding sperm donors for lesbian couples. He was in the events industry, scouting around for new venues for gay balls when he noticed the ads hundreds of them on gay websites and in gay newspapers, all placed by lesbian women seeking sperm donors.

Now he's the proud founder of a thriving business, Men not Included, which enables lesbian couples to select sperm donors from the 5000 men who have volunteered since the London-based service started in June this year. More than 3000 lesbian and some single heterosexual women have shown interest, with 600 in Britain already in the process of selecting donors and Gonzales working on setting up similar operations in other countries, including Australia.

The catchy title is not meant as a statement about the irrelevance of fathers, says Gonzales in a telephone interview. It's meant as a promise to women to eliminate the risk of seeking donors from strangers. Now women can find their donors by searching through a database of men vetted for physical and psychological health and attributes.

Gonzales is comfortable with the fact that almost all recipients choose anonymous donors even though some donors are willing to make identifying information available to the children. "That's not a choice for us to make. That's for parents to decide."

Yet there is now a strong current of thought that it is irresponsible to aid in the begetting not only of fatherless children but also of children who can never know who their fathers were. David Blankenhorn, author of the best-selling book Fatherless America, is strongly critical of what he calls "sperm fathers".

Artificial insemination by anonymous donors now accounts for 30,000 of the 4 million births each year in the United States, says Blankenhorn, who contends these births represent "our society's extreme embodiment of the idea that children do not need fathers". The cultural acceptance of the sperm father "depends in part upon hostility or at least indifference towards even the idea of fatherhood as a social role for men", he writes. (There is no data on the numbers of anonymous donors in Australia.)

Blankenhorn argues that this cultural trend undermines the recent push towards greater involvement of men in family life, where men are berated for not taking their family responsibilities more seriously. How is this greater involvement possible, he asks, if we accept sperm dads who render fathering irrelevant." The rise of the Sperm Father constitutes nothing less than father killing, the witting enactment of cultural patricide. For the individual man, being a Sperm Father is … the collaboration of the male in the eradication of their fatherhood."

Daniel Callahan is the director of the Hastings Centre, a New York bioethics research institute. Writing in the Utah Law Review in 1992, he expressed bewilderment that the moral and social implications of the use of anonymous sperm donors have passed unnoticed. "I find it remarkable that, with hardly any public debate at all, the practice indeed institution of artificial insemination by an anonymous male donor so easily slipped in. What could society have been thinking about?"

Callahan's argument is that insemination using anonymous donors socially sanctions male irresponsibility and contributes to the systematic downgrading of fatherhood: "Women have been hurt throughout history by males who abandon their parental duties, leaving to women the task of raising the children. A sperm donor is doing the same thing. The fact that he does it with social sanction does not change the outcome: one more male has been allowed to be a father without taking up the duties of fatherhood.

"Perhaps it was the case that fatherhood had already sunk to such a low state and male irresponsibility was already so accepted, that no one saw a problem. It is as if everyone argued: `Look, males have always been fathering children anonymously and irresponsibly: why not put this otherwise noxious trait to good use?'."

Gonzales invokes precisely the same argument. "We have huge sectors of society where girls get knocked up in the back of a car and the fathers disappear as soon as they discover they are pregnant, whereas we are bringing children into happy homes where they are going to be looked after. Isn't it better to do that? Children are brought up by women on their own most of the time anyway."

Male irresponsibility aside, there are other vexed moral issues at stake, namely that so many women are still using anonymous sperm to conceive children when our society is aware of the risks of denying children information about their genetic inheritance. (NSW, Western Australia and South Australia are considering laws to permit only identifiable sperm, but international laws vary widely, with many countries still permitting anonymous donors. Anonymous sperm from Denmark is shipped to clinics around the world, including Australia.)

The 1980s saw the well-publicised debate about adoption, with adoptees complaining bitterly about being raised with no opportunity to discover their true origins. Their stories led to general acceptance that many people do suffer a state of confusion known as "genealogical bewilderment" when deprived of this information. International trends for new laws are enshrining children's right to know their biological identity a right included in the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child. Some argue there's no such problem here, given the mother is known an argument which again suggests fathers are irrelevant.

More recently, Australia has heard from the so-called "stolen generation" of Aboriginal children, removed from their homes and often unable to trace their original families. In a speech in the recent parliamentary debate over stem cell research, Aboriginal Democrat Senator Aden Ridgeway made the connection between these Aborigines and children conceived using anonymous sperm, arguing that "there is an innate belief, a requirement and a compulsion in every human being to know what they are the sum of". Ridgeway, with his colleague Senator Andrew Murray, succeeded in having an amendment passed by the Senate urging the Government to ensure that every child "can, no later than on achieving adulthood, access information about their biological parents".

Victoria is the only state in Australia which guarantees that right, although moves are afoot in many states to introduce legislation to change this, and identifying information is now kept about new donors.

But there is resistance, particularly from clinics dealing mainly with couples, most of whom still choose to keep the circumstances of the child's conception a secret. Researchers from the Royal Hospital for Women in Sydney have found only 13 per cent of a group of couples with donor offspring had told their children of their origins.

These researchers find most couples resistant to having their adult offspring access identifiable donor information and note that moves towards identifiable donors have led to a drop in volunteers. For instance, Penny O'Donnell, the clinical director of the Lingard Clinic in Newcastle, reports inquiries about donation have dropped from two per month to about two per year since the clinic required identifying information to be available from donors.

While advances in reproductive technology have meant far fewer couples needing donor insemination, clinics in larger cities which cater to single and lesbian women indicate they are generally finding growth in this group is maintaining demand for donor insemination. The 70 or so lesbian and single women from Victoria who each year cross the border to the Albury Reproductive Medical Centre are being supplied using a shipment of anonymous sperm the clinic bought from Western Australia. This sperm can no longer be used in the West since that state now bans non-identifiable sperm (although, unlike Victoria, donor offspring in WA have no automatic access to information the donor must give permission.)

Despite Lisa Meldrum's successful legal challenge to the ban on single and gay women in Victoria, gay and single women can access assisted reproduction in the state only if they are clinically infertile and only about four per month are now doing so.

Brenda*, 36, is a Victorian single mother who conceived her baby through donor insemination at Fertility First, a Sydney IVF clinic. From an early age, Brenda, who works in the Public Service, was determined to have a child, with or without a man in her life. "I remember from age 16 saying if I didn't find a partner I'd still have children." She says she never saw marriage and children as mutually dependent.

When she found herself on her own after a number of serious relationships, she approached a close male friend as a potential donor. He was not suitable. "I was worried about having someone I knew who wanted to be actively involved as a father. It was all too complicated."
So she turned to Fertility First, where she received anonymous sperm, to conceive her son, now aged three months. Brenda says while she can appreciate why people think it is important that a child has a father, "I found myself in a situation where that was not for me. Did that mean I was excluded from being a mother? My answer was, no, it shouldn't be." Like many women in her situation, Brenda is convinced she can compensate for the lack of a father by providing "significant male figures" in her life to act as role models.

She would have preferred to have used identifiable sperm but remains confident her son will be fine. "While there are times he will be frustrated at not having more information, the positives of the way he was conceived will override that.

"This child is so incredibly wanted not only by me but my family and friends. He's going to have a wonderful gorgeous life filled with lots of positive people," Brenda explains, adding she has prepared a memory book for her son, including a photo of herself outside the clinic and a photo of the vial of semen.

There are moves internationally to ensure that in the future such children have more than memory books. Britain is considering requiring identifying information to be available to all donor offspring bringing it in line with Victoria, Austria and Sweden. Although there has been lobbying to make the changes retrospective in Britain, this seems unlikely, given the need to protect donors' rights.

In America, donors' rights count for little. Many of the clinics that have long accepted sperm and have promised anonymity are caving in to pressure from donors' children to release identifying

information, which has led to some offspring turning up on the doorsteps of shocked donors. Some of these clinics offer “open identity” programs, using donors willing to be contacted by adult offspring, sometimes with a two-tier payment system offering donors higher prices and recipients paying more for identifiable sperm.

It isn’t always easy finding such donors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when Sweden shifted to identifiable donors in 1985, there was an immediate drop in volunteers and only gradually did new donors start coming forward. These were more likely to be older married men, often with children, rather than the young single men once typical.

Brendon*, 61, is chuffed that the sperm he donated nine years ago has resulted in 10 children. He had assumed the donation would be anonymous but when he was contacted by the donor program at Concord Hospital where he’d donated and was told the laws were likely to change in favour of identifiable donors, he had no objection to his details being made available to the adult offspring. One family has already written to him, having sought permission through the clinic, and sent a photo of their little girl. “It gave me a bit of a buzz,” he says.

His wife wasn’t so thrilled. “When I showed her the photo she just said, “Hmmm,” he says, explaining his wife’s reservations stem from concerns about possible interbreeding between their three children and this huge new brood. Brendon is now convinced children have a right to know who their donor was.

Even with open identity donors, no one really knows how well the system will ultimately cater to the needs of both donors and offspring. The Sperm Bank of California is about to find out. Established almost two decades ago primarily to help single and lesbian women, the Berkeley clinic began an open identity program in response to demand from clients. This year the first crop of offspring turns 18 and, over the next few years, donors face the possibility of up to 20 children wishing to meet them. But as Alice Ruby, the executive director of the clinic, explains, while offspring are entitled to know who their fathers are, the donor retains the right not to see them. “The donors only agree to release identifying information, not necessarily to meet them.”

Penny and Karen are Sydney-based, mid-thirties professionals who are parents to a five-month-old daughter conceived using a known donor at Fertility First. The women were keen to find someone their child could know “not as a parent but as a godfather/uncle sort of figure. Someone we could see ourselves still friends with in 20 years’ time,” explains Karen who is birth mother to their daughter. The couple don’t believe children suffer from not having a male parent in their lives. “The most important thing you can give a child is two parents who love them and love each other,” says Karen, though she concedes “good male role models” are also important.

The couple approached a male friend but became nervous when he appeared interested in playing a quasi-parental role, suggesting, for example, that he pay school fees and have the child stay with him.

The friend they chose as donor is determined never to be seen as the child’s father. “He has specified he never wants to be called `Dad’ or regarded as `the father’,” says Penny, explaining she believes her daughter will see them as the parents and won’t need this from the donor. “At the age of 18, a well-adjusted child is not going to insist they have a right to have whatever relationship they want with a biological parent,” she adds.

Such children will never be able to insist but that doesn’t mean they won’t one day desire the man to be father to them, says Dr John Fleming, the director of the Southern Cross Bioethics Institute in

Adelaide. “People set boundaries they can’t possibly realise because they can’t speak on behalf of the child. Our essential identity is connected with our biological origins … rejecting the idea of fatherhood or seeing it as a tacked-on, optional extra is to deny the nature of human beings,” says Fleming, who believes there’s a particular problem for a male child raised with limited or no access to the biological father. (“It says to a boy, `Your sex is not valued’.”)

Yet it seems inevitable children’s rights will continue to be swamped by powerful adult needs to produce a child. Caroline Lorbach is a mother of three children conceived through anonymous donor insemination. “We were so totally ignorant. When we went to the clinic we were never encouraged to think of the child. It was `Let’s get you pregnant!’ It was only after our children started growing that I realised that what we had done wasn’t fair to them.”

Lorbach now campaigns for the Sydney-based Donor Conception Support Group of Australia which seeks to ensure no child is deprived of knowledge of their biological origins. She’s confident that couples using donor insemination are being more honest with their children.

Yet those children are raised by a man they know as their father, whether or not the original father is identified. That’s a very different decision from raising a fatherless child and deliberately denying any access to paternal origins.