



# SPERM WARFARE



BY BETTINA ARNDT

**Hundreds of Australian men are offering their sperm over the internet, to father children they may never know, or even want to know. The effects on families may be devastating.**

**M**AKE ME A MUM. THAT'S THE TITLE OF WHAT ITS critics are calling "the sickest ever reality show", being planned for British television by Brighter Pictures, the company that produces *Big Brother*. *Make Me a Mum* is a sperm race. A woman will take fertility drugs to produce eggs and 1000 men will compete to have their sperm selected for a competition to create a baby. The race will be between two finalists - a man selected for his sex appeal, personality, wealth and fitness by the mum-to-be, and a man selected by scientists for the quality of his sperm. At the end of the six-part series, viewers will see which sperm wriggles its way first into the egg, which is then implanted in the woman's womb.

Crazy stuff, eh? The idea has rightly brought the ethics boffins out in force, condemning the creation of children as TV fodder. British reproductive ethics expert Josephine Quintavalle was disgusted: "My first thoughts go to the child who will be created - what is he or she going to be told about how they were conceived?"

There are children being created in Australia today who are also destined to discover disturbing truths about how they were conceived. All over the country, hundreds of men are lining up to offer their sperm to strangers - sperm to produce children they may never know and who may never find out whose sperm won the race to their mother's egg.

These are the children conceived via the internet, chosen by mothers who scan donors' ads for the biological father for their child. "I have a very high sperm count and motility," boasts one donor advertising on an Australian site. "Great dad quality here!" claims another. "Sperm donor with high IQ," says a third.

Some 112 donors are offering their semen on a single South Australian web site. Lesbian couple Sally Ryan and Jenny Mann set up the Australian Sperm Donor Registry to help other same-sex couples but almost two-thirds of the donors and a third of the recipients are heterosexual. The men are not paid while the recipients pay \$50 for access to each donor plus a \$50 registration fee. Most of the men claim to be driven by altruism: "I detest needles so donating blood is out of the question. This is a way I can do something to help," writes one on his donor profile.

They all talk about wanting to help women have children. For some, it's an act of defiance, deliberately helping lesbian women conceive because they object to governments denying them access to IVF clinics. And it is something they can do without too much bother.

"If I have something and am able to help someone else and it's not going to cost me, then I'll do it," says 46-year-old Melbourne project manager Eric\*. Heterosexual and divorced with no children from his marriage, his hunch is that there are something like 20 to 30 kids somewhere in Australia born as a result of his 18 years of sperm donation. He started donating in clinics after meeting infertile couples during investigations of his former wife's infertility. Now he's branched out to the internet, donating mainly to lesbian couples.

Private donation involves the delivery of semen in a specimen jar (although the sites do attract the odd crank keen on delivery "the natural way"). There's about a two-hour window for delivery of the fresh sample, organised for when the woman is ovulating.

And the turkey baster once fashionable for lesbian self-insemination has been replaced by syringes (without needles) which waste less of the precious fluid. The worry is the “fresh” semen hasn’t been tested and found disease-free – as is the case with frozen semen used by clinics. Some making private arrangements organise these tests, but not all. “Often the women just want the sperm and don’t seem to care about quality or anything else at all,” says Eric.

For Eric, internet donation has led to a real novelty: he’s actually involved in the lives of some of the children. Not too involved, mind you. “There are about eight kids I do run into occasionally. Some mothers want to catch up on the child’s birthdays, others don’t want to know me at all.” Eric happily supplies semen anonymously (his early donations via the clinics were anonymous): “Some women didn’t want any of my contact details, didn’t even want my surname. We did it all on just a first-name basis and I’ve never heard from them since.”

He is fine with this but does acknowledge that not being able to trace a parent would be a problem. “I would not want to have someone live their life wondering where they came from, what dad looked like,” he says, seemingly unconcerned about the inconsistencies in his position.

He realises some children may want to contact him at adulthood, but he’s quite happy to leave it to their mothers to decide whether they will ever have his contact details. But those kids shouldn’t expect too much from the meeting. “I don’t want children landing on my doorstep. I don’t want to be involved with them. I don’t want to be a father. I’ve got no fathering instincts at all.”

Eric doesn’t like questions about the fallout for these children of never being able to trace their biological father or tracking him down only to be brushed off. Does he feel any responsibility for them? “No, I don’t,” he says curtly, adding in a peevish tone: “You’re causing me a lot of bother. I don’t know why I rang you.”

Eric’s fecundity pales next to the American donor in email correspondence with an Australian Donor Insemination (DI) support group who claims to have more than 600 children, the last 100 through the internet. Meeting them all, he says, would be “taxing”.

Of 16 Australian sperm donors interviewed for this article, many made it clear they weren’t keen on these questions. They simply weren’t interested in the repercussions for the children; they focused only

on the rights of the mothers. The most thoughtful tend to be the gay donors who seek to create some sort of family. Many hear a clock ticking: in their late 30s or 40s, they are sad to have missed out on children. Noel Posus, 37, a gay Sydney life coach has just put his name down on a donor site. His motivation: “I have quite a lot of love to give.” Love without strings, and while he’d prefer to have contact, it is not essential: “I’m happy to be in a father-like role. If I could support the family in any way, emotionally, financially, I would.”

He’d prefer the children eventually had his contact details but he’ll leave that to the lesbian couple. “They are the parents and I’d want them to make that call.” He doesn’t put much store in biological origins partly due to his own background. Born the 13th child in an American family, he was given up for adoption to friends. Raised in a happy family, Posus discovered his true origins at 13 and says the knowledge didn’t have a huge impact on his life; he is sure that if he chooses the right couple, the children will do fine.

The belief that mothers know best was one of the most striking themes to emerge from donor interviews. Most are happy to leave decision-making in the hands of the women: “I’m just a small link in the chain,” says Adam\*, 42, a Sydney sales manager. “The upbringing is the couple’s affair. I just provide the sperm and off they go.” He is married, trying for his own family and just started offering his sperm on the net.

Adam is happy if his seed is spread as far as it will go: “Thirty, 50. If the people kept coming and I can keep going, that’s fine by me.” Most of the women he’s met don’t want involvement and he sees no reason why the children need a father: “Two mothers are just as good as a mother and father. That old traditional John Howard mother-father thing, I don’t think that’s important in today’s society.” And what should the kids be told about their origins? “They may tell them they had a one-night stand, that’s up to them.”

**“ I DON’T WANT CHILDREN LANDING ON MY DOORSTEP. I DON’T WANT TO BE A FATHER, I HAVE NO FATHERING INSTINCTS AT ALL ... ”**

ERIC INTERNET SPERM DONOR



Then there’s Hugh\*, 44, a heterosexual Sydney pharmacist. He’s sired four children in the past eight months, all to lesbian women via the net. Two single women in their mid-40s are also trying to conceive using his sperm. He’s willing to do it anonymously, although he’d prefer the kids one day knew who he is. He would not say “no” to anyone wanting his semen (except perhaps “druggies”): “Who am I to say who should or should not be a parent? I don’t feel there needs to be a father for a happy family.”

HERE THEY ARE – MAN AFTER MAN – ALL convinced males are irrelevant to children’s upbringing. Justin\*, a donor who works in IT at a Melbourne university, already has one child and his partner is pregnant. He donated sperm to one lesbian couple, producing a daughter, and he is about to donate sperm to another, both via the internet. So which child would he rather be: the child to be born to his partner, or the one about to be conceived by the lesbian couple? He was emphatic neither child would have an advantage: “Historically, children have been brought up in all sorts of families. Diversity appeals to me.”

All this is happening at a time in history when fatherhood is receiving unprecedented

**SPAWN AGAIN** Andrew Barrett, left, and Noel Posus, below, are potential sperm donors who would either welcome or not object to their offspring contacting them



attention. New fatherhood books are appearing constantly; there's talk of "father hunger", of young men lamenting the lack of closer relationships with their fathers. And decades of public debate about the impact on children of losing contact with their fathers after divorce has largely concluded it is not in the children's interests. So why are so many men virtually deciding the opposite is true?

Adrienne Burgess is a fathering expert, an adviser to the British government on fatherhood policy and author of the ground-breaking *Fatherhood Reclaimed*. To someone who's been working for more than 10 years to promote positive, involved fathering, does the attitudes of our donors suggest she's fighting a losing battle?

"Yes and no - no in the sense that research shows real progress, incontrovertible evidence, that dads in intact families are increasingly close to their children," says Burgess from her home in Byron Bay, in northern NSW. "But this is undermined by this widespread notion, so clear in the responses of the men you've interviewed, that dads don't matter at all. This is complete rubbish if you look at it from the child's point of view, which hardly anyone ever does. The truth is that an

absent or detached father is a serious stressor, which, when combined with other stressors, can have a massively negative impact on a child's life chances."

Burgess wasn't surprised the men who were close to their own fathers were more likely to insist on contact when offering sperm and to refuse to donate anonymously. "My relationship with my father was something I couldn't have missed ... I wouldn't be who I am today without him in my life," says Paul Cortissos, 32, a gay Melbourne nurse who has just started offering his sperm on the net. He's determined there will be contact: "The child will have a sense they've got a father or at least a male figure in their lives."

Andrew Barrett's parents were both teachers and he spent a lot of school holiday time with his dad. Barrett, a divorced 38-year-old working for a truck manufacturing company, is considering his first sperm donation via a Melbourne clinic and he'd want the children to know who he is. "I certainly wouldn't be rejecting a child. If they wanted me to be involved in their lives I would be."

In contrast, the donors who wish to remain anonymous or have no contact are more likely to be from family backgrounds

## Insemination by sites unseen

**SPERM CONTROL** BETTINA ARNDT

There are moves to ban sperm donor web sites.

The major Australian internet trade in sperm goes through the South Australian web site, Australian Sperm Donor Registry. State Liberal MP Robert Brokenshire is attempting to pass a private member's bill to shut down the registry, his wider aim is to prevent access to similar sites that appear in SA. The bill prohibits publication of "offers to provide human reproductive material", with a \$10,000 fine for setting up such a site.

"This is a lost cause," says Irene Graham, executive director of Electronic Frontiers Australia. It may be possible to close the SA site, or even sites across Australia were all states to pass uniform legislation, she says. But there is no way of stopping access to overseas sites. "Attempts to censor pornographic material or shut down online gambling have made absolutely no difference to what Australians can access online," she says.

Queensland Senator John Hogg, back from a study tour meeting donor insemination offspring and reproductive experts in Britain and Belgium, is calling for a broad-based parliamentary inquiry into human rights issues associated with DI, including the internet trade and its implications.

"The number of children and young adults seeking knowledge of their genetic origins is too great for it to remain swept under the carpet," says Hogg.



**LOST CAUSE** Irene Graham says an Australian ban would not prevent access to overseas sites

involving an absent dad, either through divorce or simply hard work. Chris\*, 39, a heterosexual Melbourne-based article clerk, is the son of a politician. "My father was very much the absent father," says Chris, who is organising to donate to a lesbian neighbour and is also advertising on the net. He'd be willing to meet the children but wants no involvement. He's convinced two lesbian parents, both coming home at night to share the parenting, would do a better job than many traditional families. "Fathers don't offer anything unique."

Richard Fletcher, director of the Engaging Fathers project at Newcastle University, suggests males who grew up with absent dads face an interesting dilemma. Confronted with the societal message that father involvement is critical, "they are forced to either conclude they must themselves be damaged or else to decide it doesn't matter". Rather than judging themselves poorly, they conclude dads simply don't rate and are happy to conceive children who may never know them.

Many of their children will face that fate, since no official records are kept of donors using the internet. (This also raises real concerns of inter-breeding, where internet offspring unknowingly mate with half-siblings.)

Unlike donor insemination children born to heterosexual couples, those raised by lesbians or single women know there must have been a donor. How will they feel about their mothers using anonymous donors? Or a donor who was only willing to meet them provided there was no "involvement"?

Intentionality is the key issue here. Many of these children are being deliberately conceived in circumstances where they will grow up to have to deal with the harrowing truth about the irresponsible way they were conceived. Unlike 30 or 40 years ago, when infertile couples were advised to keep secret the circumstances of the child's creation, these children will know there's a donor; many, perhaps most, will want to get to know that donor. And many will be doomed to disappointment.

It is finally being recognised that DI offspring have a right to know their biological origins, some 20 years after we enshrined that right for adopted children. Two years ago, Democrat senators Andrew Murray and Aden

Ridgeway pushed through an amendment to a bill on embryos, declaring DI children had a right to identifying information about their biological parents. This is now law in Victoria and Western Australia, and in the next month or so, legislation to this effect is likely to be passed by the NSW parliament.

The Australian Health Ethics Committee is about to release new guidelines supporting the right of DI offspring to such information, banning the use of anonymous sperm and requiring clinics to remind potential

donors of "the significance of the biological connection they will have with the persons conceived". Anonymous sperm is still being used in a number of Sydney clinics and in the states that have not banned its use. Nevertheless most DI children are unlikely to be informed about their origins because they are being raised by couples who will keep it a secret. A recent survey by the Royal Hospital for Women in Sydney indicated less than 10% of couples using its clinic tell their offspring the truth.



**HIS & HERS** Sperm donor Michael Linden with wife Lia Vandersant, her son Liam, and Linden's daughter by donor insemination, Myfanwy Walker

YET THE PUSH IS ON, LED BY A NEW GENERATION of DI young adults actively lobbying for less secrecy. Most of them were conceived using anonymous sperm and face the immense frustration of probably never tracing their biological fathers. Victoria has a voluntary register for donors who previously gave anonymously but are now willing to be contacted. However, only 58 of the hundreds of donors have come forward – leaving thousands, like Narelle Grech, high and dry.

Grech, a 21-year-old Melbourne social work student, knows the terrible frustration of talking to the doctor at the clinic where she was conceived, knowing he had the information in front of him and was unable to give it to her. He had written to her anonymous donor asking if he'd meet Narelle but received no reply. "I have so much frustration and anger toward the doctor but I know he's legally bound not to tell me," she says. Having recently discovered she has four half-sisters and three half-brothers, she wants to know them, too.

Grech is a member of TangledWebs (*tangledwebs\_cdc@yahoo.com.au*), an Australian group concerned about some of the hidden complexities surrounding donor insemination. Members have all been involved in DI and include donors, DI offspring and their families. TangledWebs was started by Michael Linden and his partner Lia Vandersant after Linden discovered through a newspaper story that a daughter conceived from sperm he'd donated 18 years before was looking for him. He immediately recognised Myfanwy Walker as his daughter; they met and photographs of the two – both fair-haired, blue-eyed and remarkably similar – were splashed across the media as the happy end to Myfanwy's painful search.

But for the families, this was only the

there are real issues in meeting the woman who has had her partner's children – it is not uncommon for such reunions to ignite sparks between donors and the mothers of the children. (In the US, a similar reunion led to the mother of the DI offspring falling in love with the donor and she subsequently moved with her daughter to live near him – not much fun for the donor's wife.)

Michael Linden is now very close to his new children but donating sperm, he has decided, is "an act of stupidity". It is grossly irresponsible for men "to intentionally create a situation where a child is never going to know who their biological father is, or if they do find him, may never be able to establish a good relationship with him". TangledWebs wants a parliamentary inquiry into DI and argues the procedures may ultimately need to be outlawed, a stance that attracts great hostility. Myfanwy Walker and another young DI woman recently appeared on Channel 9's *60 Minutes*, then the following week were criticised by journalist Peter Harvey: "These two young women have been given life... How dare they seek to deny it to others?"

SURELY IT IS ONLY THOSE WHO HAVE PERSONAL experience who are in a position to warn of the pitfalls. Linden points out that the emphasis on children being able to trace the donor won't solve the problems – in fact, it's "where many of the problems begin".

Like young people discovering their fathers don't want to meet them (even with identified sperm, the donor retains the right to refuse contact), or will meet just the once, or donors enthusiastic over meeting their first DI offspring but then the novelty wears off. In the US, 13-year-old Ryan Kramer and his mother Wendy have set up a web site, Donor Sibling Registry, for DI offspring connection. Ryan hopes that if he does find his father, he's the first rather than the 20th.

Reunions can be plain sailing or, even better, joyous events. Peter Browne, 53, met

face in blending members from different families, it's hardly surprising others are running into trouble. Often it is the donor's partner who foresees the problems. Nancy, partner of Justin, the Melbourne IT guy who was donating to two lesbian families, is pregnant with their second child and has major misgivings: "I think it will be harder on me than on him. I'm prepared if there's a person to embrace into our lives but I see it as so many unknowns."

Her concerns have increased since their first child: "I had huge reservations a second time." She is nervous about her children's relationship with the half-siblings, who "could be in any sort of emotional state" when they turn up. "It's an innate protective thing concerning my family." Some of her disquiet may stem from her background: her parents divorced, her father remarried then devoted himself to his new family.

Ken Daniels, professor of social work at New Zealand's University of Canterbury, has spent almost three decades studying the social impact of DI and has been instrumental in pushing his country towards increasing openness. Last month, New Zealand enacted legislation that requires people seeking DI to inform their children about the nature of their conception; clinics haven't used anonymous sperm for more than 15 years and children are increasingly having contact with donors, even from a young age – all moves which Daniels applauds. But he acknowledges that family dynamics aren't always easy.

In Australia, this was highlighted by the 2002 family law tragedy involving Patrick, a young boy who died with his lesbian mother in a murder-suicide when his donor father was awarded regular contact.

Six years ago, Melbourne hotel manager Peter Spark, 33, was in regular contact with the son conceived by a lesbian woman using his sperm. A year later, the lesbian couple decided "they didn't want a male in their lives" and Spark hasn't seen the child since. He's had a far more positive experience with two children born to another lesbian couple. The older child, a boy now nearly four, had started asking to see Spark more often and he's gradually being allowed more contact.

These are tenuous bonds, easily broken at the whim of adults making decisions about their own lives. It's a constant risk with DI, especially via the internet. Adults become consumed by their own wishes and desires: infertile couples wanting to pretend the child is all their own; lesbian and single women not wanting a man in their lives; well-meaning donors who don't give a toss about the children conceived through their benevolence. Says Ken Daniels: "The interests of children are often forgotten or downplayed in the rush to satisfy one's own needs."

But is anyone listening? ●

\* names have been changed

## THE INTERESTS OF CHILDREN ARE OFTEN FORGOTTEN, OR DOWNPLAYED, IN THE RUSH TO SATISFY ONE'S OWN NEEDS ...

KEN DANIELS PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL WORK, UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

beginning of years of stressful interaction as Vandersant and her son, Liam, coped with the initial infatuation between Linden and his new daughter then helped Myfanwy's brother Michael (also Linden's son) find a place in the family. "I really love Michael's kids but it was such an invasion ... the initial feelings between Michael [Linden] and Myfanwy were so intense that the rest of us felt abandoned, rejected, redundant," says Vandersant who acknowledges it was a very rocky period in their marriage. She says

his daughter Danielle Heath, 22, at a Donor Conception Support Group three years ago. She guessed he was her father when she saw him, DNA tests confirmed it and the two lived together for a period in Brisbane. Peter, who never had children, was thrilled: "It's gone a long way towards validating my whole existence." The two are now trying to trace Danielle's brother, another product of Browne's sperm.

Given that decades of research have underlined the difficulties many stepfamilies