

Post print

This is an author-produced PDF of an article published in *BioNews*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version is: Newson, A. (2003) "Defending 'secrecy': why removing donor anonymity may not be a good idea." *BioNews*, issue 209, 28 April, available at: http://www.bionews.org.uk/page_37685.asp

Defending 'secrecy': why removing donor anonymity is not a good idea

28 April 2003

By Dr Ainsley Newson

Should children conceived through the use of donated gametes have access to information identifying their donors when they reach maturity? The UK Government is expected soon to decide that, from now on, the answer to this question is to be 'yes'. But is this a good idea? Even though there are sound reasons for relaxing absolute secrecy in the use of donor gametes, donor identification represents an unnecessary step. And it's a bad idea whether or not identifying donors will lead to a decrease the numbers of people donating gametes.

Why do people want to remove anonymity? Those lobbying for its removal give several reasons, such as the right of children to know about their genetic heritage taking priority over donor's rights. Knowledge of genetic parentage is also significant to our sense of personal identity, including our cultural and ethnic ties. Additionally, the importance of openness for the welfare of children dictates a need for identifying information.

Against this, supporters of donor anonymity highlight the significance of donors' rights to confidentiality and privacy. Anonymity also ensures donors donate for 'good' reasons anonymous donors are more likely to harbour an altruistic desire to assist people to have children, rather than a narcissistic wish to increase one's genetic offspring. Moreover, allowing or compelling a visible third party's entry into donor insemination (DI) families could lead to disruption and hurt on all sides.

Weighing up these competing claims is difficult. Whose rights are paramount? How can the dynamics of each unique family be accounted for? These are thorny issues, but respecting the rights of those involved does not necessarily entail the removal of donor anonymity. However, total secrecy is also unwarranted and so some change to current regulations is justified.

Let's address an important principle at play here: how much significance should we place on genetic ties? The donation of sperm or eggs is, of course, not the same as a blood donation, where we sever our attachment to the tissue once the donation is complete. Donating gametes often leads to the creation of a new person, with half of his or her genes coming from the donor. This person will develop interests, emotions and a desire for self-understanding as they grow older. To them, information about their genetic parents may be highly relevant.

On the other hand, too much concern with genetic bonds could de-emphasise the relationship between DI children and their gestational/social parents. It is vital that the role of the donor does not take on greater importance than it should, confusing our understanding of what makes a parent. The donor's purpose is not to become a parent, but to help others become parents, and to effectively mandate donors becoming third parties to parent-child relationships would represent an

inappropriate policy development. Indeed, enforcing donor identification would institute a scenario impossible to guarantee to the rest of society, particularly the 10 percent of us who do not know our true genetic fathers.

A better alternative to donor identification is offering comprehensive, but non-identifying, information to DI children when they reach maturity. This could include the donor's medical history, interests, occupation and ethnicity. To avoid a deductive disclosure of identity, donors could write and provide a brief biography. Emphasis should be placed on maintaining high-quality and up-to-date information, not a donor's name and address. A voluntary register could also be established, where donors willing to meet their 'offspring' could be matched to DI children seeking their genetic parents. This degree of 'secrecy' will not deny the rights of people born from the use of donor gametes.

Overall, it is vital that UK children born using DI have access to more information than they do currently and for this access to be standardised across clinics. But removing donor anonymity entirely will have far-reaching consequences for all those involved with donor insemination. This has to be considered very carefully before we move forward. Although the many alternatives for managing DI are not perfect, once confidentiality is removed, it can never be returned.

Perhaps, instead of debates about the need for donor anonymity, a more pressing issue needs to be addressed: the fact that very few parents even inform their children that they are the offspring of donated gametes, and that this right to secrecy is strongly defended by some DI parents. Currently, the majority of children born with donor sperm or eggs will never be offered the opportunity to explore their biological origins, regardless of whether or not we identify donors.

Ainsley Newson is a Post-Doctoral Associate in Clinical Ethics and Genetics at Imperial College, London.