

## “Donor Offspring” Redefining Family

*John Burger*

**G**o to Yahoo Groups, and type in the words “Donor Conceived.” You’ll get a listing of some 40 Internet-based communities a person can join and search further.

Search for what?

“This group is for families who conceived with NorthWest Andrology and Cryobank Donor #188G,” says the group called “donor-188g.” “Membership is by invitation only and for those who have children by Donor 188G or are pregnant by this donor.”

Donor 188G is an anonymous sperm donor, and presumably the sperm bank promised never to reveal his identity, even to his offspring.

Another Yahoo group has been set up with an eye to the future, when the children of a particular donor *may* be searching for their progenitor: “This is a group for parents who are trying to conceive or have already conceived using Midwest Sperm Bank’s donor # 038. It will give our children (future or current) a chance to know other offspring from this donor,” said “mw038kids.”

Similar groups have been established for donors—not only sperm donors, but also women who have sold their eggs to egg banks. Facebook has similar groups to which seekers can belong.

Alas, information technology has come face to face with an area of modern life in which, for some at least, too little information exists. Adopted children often search for their biological parents when they grow up. But with artificial reproductive technologies with us for several decades now, the search for “my real mother” or “my real father” has taken on a new meaning.

Baby-making options are many, for those who can afford it. Sperm donation is an old technology, going back a hundred years or more. Egg donation is relatively new. In vitro fertilization is now common, 30 years after the birth of Louise Brown, the first test-tube baby. There’s more and more acceptance of single parenting, and some single mothers have decided to have children without the help even of a boyfriend. Same-sex couples who feel incomplete without a child have options such as sperm- and egg-donation and surrogate motherhood readily available.

And, in an age of greater openness, many children who were conceived with the help of donated gametes are growing up and coming to understand

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that the mother or father who raised them is not their biological parent.

Ryan Kramer is one such child. He's never met his biological father, but he's still hoping that the exposure he's gotten in the media will help prompt his donor to come forward. Ryan and his mother, Wendy Kramer, have appeared on television shows such as *Good Morning America*. In 2000, Wendy Kramer started the Donor Sibling Register as one of those Yahoo Groups for people seeking their donor parents. It has grown to become an independent website, [donorsiblingregistry.com](http://donorsiblingregistry.com), listing 22,000 people.

Kramer and her husband, who had "fertility issues," used artificial insemination. She's raised Ryan alone since he was one, when she and her husband split up.

Ryan, now 18, noticed early on that other kids in school had two parents, while he had only his mother. "So did my Dad die or what?" he finally asked his mother one day.

Wendy Kramer decided to be frank with him and gradually helped him understand how he came to be. "My son has always known he's donor-conceived and always had a curiosity as to who his biological father was and if perhaps he had biological half-siblings out there," she said. "When he became really curious we quickly realized that the industry—the sperm bank, the doctor, the clinic—nobody was willing to help us or facilitate mutual-consent contact."

Said Ryan: "When I would look in the mirror, discover something new, a new interest I had, a new talent or something like that, I could always relate what I had in common to my maternal side of the family, but on the other side of it, there were all these characteristics that I noticed about myself that obviously didn't come from my mom's side of the family. And always, my curiosity was driven by wanting to see the source of all those parts of myself in somebody else."

#### **'Redefining Family'**

The issue was not merely sentimental for the Kramers. Wendy Kramer said the anonymity that the sperm bank had given the donor meant that she and her son would not know if, say, the donor suddenly discovered that he had a hereditary disease to which Ryan also might be susceptible.

This may be what leads some sperm donors to list themselves on the Donor Sibling Registry, which is populated mostly by donor-conceived offspring. Wendy Kramer believes some donors register out of this sense of responsibility: "They're like, 'You know, I feel like it's the ethical and the right thing to do, and I have medical information to share with these families.'"

People listing themselves provide the donor ID number their parent or

parents received from their sperm bank. Donor-conceived children and donors with the same number are then free to contact each other.

In February 2007, a 13-year-old girl found through the website that she shared a donor number with Ryan Kramer. “She is three years younger than me, and we were able to meet, and we talk all the time now and it’s been excellent getting to know somebody who shares that genetic half of me,” he said. “Being able to see someone who’s got those same characteristics, in large part answered most of my questions.” Said his mother: “We got to experience this expanding family dynamic. It’s about redefining family, but also in a very positive way expanding family.”

### **Relief, Then Disappointment**

It’s not always so idyllic. Katrina Clark wrote of her experience in the *Washington Post* in late 2006, saying her sigh of relief upon finding her donor father eventually turned into disappointment when he seemed to be losing enthusiasm for their “developing relationship.” He finally admitted that he was tired of “this whole sperm-donor thing.”

“The irony stings me more each time I think of him saying that,” wrote Clark, a student at Gallaudet University. “The very thing that brought us together was pushing us in opposite directions.”

Being tired of the “whole sperm-donor thing” may be an emotion experienced by many former donors. Some donors actually have over 100 biological children, Kramer says, although a leading physician in the infertility field, Dr. Robert Brzyski, finds that number a stretch. “If a person has a normal semen analysis, a single sample could produce maybe five vials of sperm,” said Brzyski, chairman of the ethics committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine and an associate professor in obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio. “I would estimate one in eight vials produces a baby, but if a person collects cumulatively over time, let’s see, how many ejaculates would it take to have over 800 vials?”

Nonetheless, donors who register on Kramer’s website “get overwhelmed” after connecting with two to eight offspring, Kramer said. “They can’t deal with it.”

### **‘Someone Who Was Never There’**

Elizabeth Marquardt, author of the forthcoming book *My Daddy’s Name Is Donor*, said there are estimates that 50,000 to 75,000 children are conceived each year in the United States as a result of sperm donation. “But nobody really knows how many there are because there’s no reporting required of

pregnancies achieved by this method in the U.S., and no tracking.”

Speaking to this reporter in the fall of 2008, Marquardt, vice president for family studies at the Institute for American Values, said she was still analyzing data for her book, but felt confident enough to say that donor-conceived children’s experiences of identity and of trying to figure out who they are and where they come from “are much more troubled and filled with loss” than those of children conceived in a traditional-marriage relationship.

Rather than being helped by searching for donor parents through Internet registries, Marquardt said, they can find the experience disconcerting. “It can be very troubling to young people to find out I have 20 or 30 or 100 or 300 half-siblings,” she said:

We have no idea what that does psychologically to someone. It’s never been an issue before.

What do you do when you’re 15 and you find the guy who is your biological father? We sort of talk about that like it’s the end of the game: ‘Oh, you’re one of the lucky ones who’s found your donor.’ From the donor-conceived offspring I talk to, that’s the *beginning*.

First of all, you don’t know if he’s going to accept or reject you. If he does accept you, how many other donor offspring does he have coming to him as well? How many children has he had in his own life with a spouse or something? . . . If he gets sick do you have an obligation to care for him? Would he come to your college graduation? . . . Is he a father or not? What is he? And how do you begin establishing some kind of a relationship with someone who was never there, to do all the things that a father is supposed to do? Who is this man for you, and who are you for this man? That’s a heavy load to hand to a 12-year-old or a 16-year-old or a 25-year-old.

#### **‘That’s When the Emptiness Came Over Me’**

Katrina Clark, in her *Washington Post* article, wrote of having found the “missing puzzle . . . of who I am” the day she heard from her donor, complete with an e-mailed photo that seemed to mirror her own features. Before that, she went through periods of rebellion because of a sense of fatherlessness.

“Those of us . . . conceived in the late 1980s and early ’90s, when sperm banks became more common and donor insemination began to flourish, are coming of age, and we have something to say,” she wrote. “I’m here to tell you that emotionally, many of us are not keeping up. We didn’t ask to be born into this situation, with its limitations and confusion. We offspring are recognizing the right that was stripped from us at birth—the right to know who both our parents are. And we’re ready to reclaim it.”

Although Clark’s mother had told her early on about her circumstances, the girl longed for a father and felt jealous seeing other girls with theirs. Her mother, single for quite a while, finally married, and Katrina didn’t take to her stepfather. They quarreled, and Katrina lashed out at him. “That was

when the emptiness came over me. I realized that I am, in a sense, a freak. I really, truly would never have a dad. I finally understood what it meant to be donor-conceived, and I hated it.”

Margaret Somerville, director of the Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law at McGill University in Montreal, knows about the grief that such children can feel. She’s been studying it for years, and as a bioethicist she has strong feelings on what the phenomenon means in terms of the meaning of life.

“They talk about being genetic orphans and talk about ‘Not only do I not know where I came from, but my child won’t know where they came from,’” she said. “I had someone saying to me recently that they thought knowing who your genetic relatives were is so important because it’s the only bond you couldn’t renounce. You can reverse a marriage, agreements, whatever, but this is so fundamental.”

Stacy Smedly, a 28-year-old architect from Seattle, was donor-conceived by her single mother and grew up without a father in her life. She explains how she found out her origins: “My Mom was very honest about it. I was in kindergarten so I was, I think, five. And you go to all those meetings and things and the kids always have their mom and dad with them and I always only had my mom. So I just asked her one night, ‘Mom, why don’t I have a dad?’ and she sat me down and took out that ‘Where Do Babies Come From?’ book and explained how it all works and said, ‘Well, instead of me having a person with me to help me do this, there’s a really kind of stranger out there that gave me half the ingredients I needed to make you.’”

Unlike Katrina Clark, Smedly said she doesn’t feel something is missing, partly because she had her grandfather in her life, helping to fill the father’s role. “I never felt I needed a father there to do things with or to fill that role in my life,” she said.

She is seeking out her “donor”—she doesn’t think of him as her father—through various means, including the Donor Sibling Registry, but simply wants to learn medical history and genealogical information to help her understand her ethnic background. She said the sperm bank her mother used merely provided his family tree—without names—and basic information on how old forebears were when they died.

She did find a half brother through the registry, though, and meeting him, she said, has helped answer a lot of the questions she’s had about her genetic makeup. They talked by phone and finally met. “The families met, and meeting him has actually filled in a lot of those missing puzzle pieces that I have, just because we have the commonalities we can see in each other in terms of physical traits and personality traits and funny quirks and things like that,” she said of the man, three years her junior and a Peace Corps

volunteer in Africa. “They’re pretty strong, so it was pretty comforting to me to find a match.”

### **Debates Brewing**

In many places there are emerging debates over what to put on a birth certificate, whether to ban anonymous donation (some in the infertility-treatment field fear that would have a chilling effect on gamete donors), at what age to allow a child to request the identity of a donor, and, for parents, when it’s best—*if it’s best*—to tell a donor-conceived child about his origins.

In fact, the debate is already leading to changes. In 2005, Great Britain abolished strictly anonymous sperm donation. Children conceived with donated gametes are now able to find out the identity of the donor once they hit 18. The London-based International Donor Offspring Alliance states on its website ([idoalliance.org](http://idoalliance.org)): “People have a moral right to know the truth about their personal history.” The alliance believes that a person’s genetic parentage should be recorded on his birth certificate “or associated documentation available to the donor-conceived person.”

In Switzerland, the constitution recognizes a child’s right to know his biological lineage, including identifying donor information.

In France, 25-year-old Arthur Kermalvezen has been seeking the identity of his sperm-donor father—and leading a campaign against donor anonymity.

And in Canada, Olivia Pratten has brought a class-action lawsuit on behalf of people in British Columbia conceived via anonymous sperm, egg, and embryo donation. Adopted children have legal rights and opportunities to know about their biological parents that children conceived by way of gamete donation do not, she points out. According to press materials on the case, plaintiffs have been denied access to vital health information from various physicians who practiced donor insemination.

In the U.S., Wendy Kramer and others would like to see reforms in the assisted-reproduction “industry,” as she calls it. She believes it is in a chaotic state, even today, failing to track how many children are born from each donor, for example, or update medical records. “I think they’ve lost sight of the families they’re helping to create,” she said.

Brzyski, the chairman of the ethics committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, said the committee believes there should be “at least non-identifying medical and biographical information” shared with the offspring and “the consideration of some sort of periodic update, especially regarding medical issues, whether some condition develops in the offspring that is relevant to the donor, and vice versa, that there be a process for communication of that, and that there may be even more opportunities for

contact between the offspring and the donor.”

Speaking in October 2008, before the release of an ethics-committee statement on the issue, he added: “One of the things that the committee felt was that this is a decision that should be the offspring, the adult child’s decision, once they reach the age of making those decisions as an adult, whether 18 or 21, whatever. . . . The rearing parents really have no ethical relationship to this issue because the genetic link is between the child and the donor.”

The ethics committee issued guidelines for gamete and embryo donation in 2002, requiring clinics to maintain permanent records of donor screening and selection data, donor examinations, and clinical outcomes as a future medical source for offspring.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine also points out that the American Medical Association calls for maintaining permanent records with identifying and non-identifying health and genetic-screening information on sperm donors. The ethics committee supports full disclosure on the part of rearing parents to their donor-conceived children of the facts of their conception.

#### **Dangers of Anonymity**

Kramer and Smedly found their donor-conceived siblings through the Internet—and knew they were related. But what if they met their respective sister and brother in another forum, say in a bar or on an Internet dating site—and fell in love? If they didn’t know they were biological siblings, they would be left open to a possible incestuous relationship.

Brzyski said that within a given geographical area, the number of children born from a particular donor is limited in order to reduce the risk of consanguinity. Still, it’s only one of many issues that concern Elizabeth Marquardt. The Chicago-based researcher would like to see a national debate about donor conception because she feels there’s not enough awareness of issues like possible consanguinity. Although she’s not arguing for a ban on donor conception, she believes that there needs to be more regulation and that prospective parents should think twice before taking this route.

“Based on the data I’ll be publishing next year and what I’m seeing,” she said, “I think it’s a better idea for parents not to do this.”

#### **Metaphysical Questions**

Though she is not Catholic, Marquardt says the wisdom of Catholic teaching on matters of procreation has become more apparent as new technologies begin to play out in people’s lives. “The more we learn, the

more the Church position on this makes a lot of sense because . . . you start introducing these separations between sex and reproduction, between sex and marriage, between reproduction and raising children, all these separations that are being introduced, to the point that parenthood has become fragmented, and we have gestational parenthood, genetic parenthood, social parenthood, and different players can be involved in a child's life or not, all stemming from these separations that were introduced, which the Church has been opposed to all along."

Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, for example, emphasized the necessity of maintaining the bond between the unitive and procreative ends of the conjugal act. Artificial contraception breaks that bond. So do, as the 1987 document *Donum Vitae* pointed out, artificial means of reproduction. Issued by the Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Donum Vitae* insisted that human procreation take place within the conjugal act.

As Catholic bioethicist William E. May put it in his book *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life*, "If the procedure replaces or substitutes for the conjugal act, it is immoral; if, however, it assists or helps the conjugal act to achieve its purpose, it may be morally licit."

Margaret Somerville also looks at the issue metaphysically, though not from a particular religious standpoint. "A child's right to be conceived with a natural biological heritage is the most fundamental human right and should be recognized in law," she wrote in "Brave New Babies," an article on Mercator.net. "Children have a right to be conceived from untampered-with biological origins, a right to be conceived from a natural sperm from one identified, living, adult man and a natural ovum from one identified, living, adult woman. Society should not be complicit in—that is, should not approve or fund—any procedure for the creation of a child, unless the procedure is consistent with the child's right to a natural biological heritage."

Marquardt believes the needs of the child have been largely ignored compared to the needs of infertile couples. "The whole attitude has been so much about the needs and experiences of infertile adults and the need to heal that wound of infertility by any means possible, to the point that the experience of the child is silenced," she said. "We're not even supposed to ask the question because it makes infertile adults feel bad. You have would-be parents who choose not to adopt and choose instead to conceive a child through egg or sperm donation precisely because they want to have a genetic relationship to their child, and yet the child's relationship to that absent sperm donor or absent egg donor is not supposed to matter to the child. So there's a real contradiction there."

Andrea Braverman, a psychologist who works with couples thinking about donor conception and who is on the ethics committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, largely agrees, but says the profession is catching up.

“I think [Marquardt has] a point to make, which is, historically, the children weren’t considered,” Braverman said. “The assumption was that once the child was born they were never going to find out about it, so there was no hurt to have to consider and that they would be surrounded by love and everything would be great. No one thought there were going to be any needs. That’s changed dramatically in maybe the last decade or two, with all of this saying ‘Wait a minute, hold the phone. They’re not babies very long; they grow up and become adults with their own needs and perceptions.’”

### **The Future**

Marquardt hopes America will start to talk about the issue before too much longer. New technologies are being developed, including same-sex procreation—already successfully done in mice. Reproductive cloning apparently is gaining acceptance, with a recent survey showing 10 percent of fertility-clinic directors saying they would support it for their patients. And children have been created with the DNA of three adults—from the sperm of the father, the nucleus of the mother’s egg (because the woman has a genetic condition or old eggs), and the cytoplasm of a younger woman’s egg. A child could therefore have three genetic parents.

“It’s being done initially as medical treatment in exceptional cases,” Marquardt said. “But you have polygamy and polyamory today, so maybe there will be three people who want to reproduce in this way.”

Youngsters and adults now seeking their sperm-donor fathers have at least one advantage: knowing that somewhere in the world, they do have a father. Under the new British Human Fertilization and Embryology bill, passed by the House of Commons last October, in vitro fertilization clinics will no longer have to consider the need for a child to have a father when deciding whether to offer treatment to lesbian couples.

According to a 2007 article in the British newspaper *The Independent*, scientists might be able to produce sperm cells from a woman’s bone-marrow tissue, thus eliminating altogether the need for a man to father a child.

Thus, for some people in the future, the search for a father will be fruitless.