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What you need to know about using donated sperm, eggs or embryos in your treatment

Introduction

Around 800 babies in the UK are born each year using donated sperm, eggs or embryos. The experience of people who have had donor-conceived children shows that this can be a very positive way to create a family.

If you are considering using donated sperm, eggs or embryos, there are some things that are important to think about. This leaflet is designed to:

- help you prepare to receive donated sperm, eggs or embryos
- enable you to understand how the law affects you and your family
- answer your questions about using donated sperm, eggs or embryos
- encourage you to think about the emotional and psychological issues you will face

What is donor conception and could it help me?

Donor conception involves using sperm, eggs or embryos donated by someone else. It could help you if:

- you are not producing eggs or sperm of your own
- your own sperm or eggs are unlikely to result in the conception of a baby
- you have a high risk of passing on an inherited disease.

To find out more about the medical aspects of donor conception see the *HFEA Guide to Infertility*.

How might I feel about using donor conception?

If you are considering using donated sperm, eggs or embryos you may feel a sense of loss because your, and/or your partner's, genes will not be passed on to your children. You may worry about how your partner feels about this and how it will affect your children, family and friends.

Take time to reflect before going ahead. Discuss how you feel with your partner and try to talk to parents who already have donor-conceived children. Your clinic will offer you the chance to talk to a counsellor and this can help you to sort out your feelings. Many

clinics also run local patient support groups. You may want to contact the Donor Conception Network too (contact details at the end of this leaflet).

What is the HFEA and why does it have to be involved?

The HFEA - Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority - is the body that regulates fertility treatment in the UK. We license all clinics providing IVF and keep a register of all licensed fertility treatments and children born as a result. This includes information about whether the treatment uses donated sperm, eggs or embryos. We also give information to people who were conceived by donation if they request it, and in future, following a change in the law, will have be able to give even more.

How has thinking about donation changed?

In the past infertility – and the idea of using a donor – was often seen as rather shameful. Parents were advised not to tell their children about how they were conceived. Few imagined that donor-conceived children would want to know, or ever could know, the truth about their conception.

Today all that has changed. Huge medical advances mean infertility has lost its stigma. Now, each year, 30,000 people a year have fertility treatment and 9,000 babies are born as a result. We know that parents and donor-conceived children often wonder about the donor and why they chose to donate.

We also know that donors think about the children they may have helped to create. Many donors hope that children created from their sperm, eggs or embryos are aware from an early age about how they were conceived. It would be very upsetting to be contacted by a young person for whom the news that they were donor-conceived had come as a total shock. Current thinking is that secrecy is not in children's best interests and that they have a right to know about their genetic origins.

What does the law say about donation?

This greater openness about infertility and donation is now reflected in the law. Until April 2005, people who donated sperm, eggs and embryos remained anonymous. Donors had to give identifying details for our register, but these were confidential. Under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, people over the age of 18 could apply to find out if they were conceived using donated sperm, eggs or embryos. They could also ask whether they were related to someone they wanted to marry. But they were not allowed to know the identity of their donor.

After consultation, the Government has decided that the benefits of allowing people to find out more about their genetic origins outweigh the disadvantages and the law has changed. People conceived using eggs, sperm or embryos from people who registered (or re-registered) as donors after 1 April 2005 will be able to consult our register and find out who the donor was, once they reach 18.

What are the potential benefits of the new law?

The new law recognises that our genes are part of our identity and that knowing about our genetic heritage can help us to understand who we are. This can be important:

- for the psychological and emotional wellbeing of donor-conceived people. We know that many of them, like people who have been adopted, are naturally curious about their genetic origins.
- for medical reasons. We are all born with inherited characteristics, some of which predispose us towards certain medical conditions. Knowing the medical history of people genetically related to you may help you to get an early diagnosis and effective treatment for an inherited disease.
- for family relationships. Family secrets can undermine trust and lead to conflict and stress. They can also suggest to children (and others) that their parents are ashamed of how they were conceived. Children often have a sense that a secret is being kept. It is hoped the change in the law will encourage more parents to be open with their donor-conceived children.
- for donor-conceived people's future relationships. There is a small but real risk that two people who are genetic siblings could have children together without realising they were related. If parents tell their children they were donor-conceived they will be able check this out.
- for donors. Donors are often curious about the children they may have created. Under the new law they will be able to find out from the clinic how many children were born as a result of their donation. They will not be able to identify them by name, however, although children will be able to find out who the donor was and may wish to contact them.

How easy will it be to get treatment now the law has changed?

Demand for donors has always outstripped supply and this is still true today. This means you may have to wait for the clinic to find you a suitable donor. We do not know what the effect of the change in law will have, but we suspect that, in the short term at least, it may lead to a dip in the number of donors. However there is evidence from Sweden, parts of Australia and New Zealand, where donors are identifiable, that suggests that this is only likely to be for a time. The Department of Health has launched a national recruitment campaign in partnership with the National Gamete Donation Trust to encourage more donors to come forward.

I've heard of people getting eggs from abroad and buying fresh sperm for home insemination on the Internet. Is this a good option?

This is something you need to think about extremely carefully for several important reasons:

- Donors who give sperm or eggs through a licensed clinic must answer a series of questions designed to ensure that they are suitable and know what they are doing.
- Licensed clinics check donors' family histories to see if they could be carrying inherited diseases, and all sperm goes through stringent checks to make sure it is completely healthy and not carrying any infections.
- There are limits on the numbers of families created by each donor where sperm, eggs or embryos are used to treat you at a licensed clinic.
- With licensed treatment, the donor's information and identity will be kept in our Register and your child will have a legal right to get hold of this information when they reach 18.
- If you go through a licensed clinic your legal position and that of the donor is absolutely clear. You are the legal parent of the child and there is no question of the donor being able to make a claim for or being responsible for them. If you don't use a licensed service the legal position is less clear and the donor could have a claim on or responsibility for the child.

When should I tell my child about their origins and what should I say?

There are no hard and fast rules, but many experts say that it is better to start early, even before your child can talk or understand the facts of life. This allows you to become familiar with talking to your child about how they were conceived so that, by the time they are old enough to ask questions, it is already part of their life story.

Donors are encouraged to provide detailed information including a short description of themselves and a message of goodwill to any children conceived. You may find this helpful once your child starts to ask detailed questions. It is a good idea to talk to the counsellor at the clinic about how you could approach telling your child. The Donor Conception Network also has information leaflets and personal stories.

Will the child be legally mine? What do I put on the birth certificate?

If you and your partner were treated together at a licensed fertility clinic in the UK you are the legal parents of the child and should put your names on the birth certificate. The donor has no legal relationship or financial responsibilities towards the child. The change in the law on anonymity does not affect this.

I already have a child from an anonymous donor. Can I use sperm from the same donor that is in storage to try for another child?

Yes, if the sperm is available. However if the man registered before 1 April 2005, he will remain anonymous.

Can I reserve sperm for future siblings so my children have the same father?

You can if the sperm is available. Provided the donor agrees to his sperm being used, clinics are usually willing to store sperm from donors, even those who have reached the 10 live birth limit, to allow siblings to have the same father. Sperm can be frozen and stored for up to 10 years, although in practice they tend to be used up fairly quickly. This is something the clinic should discuss with you when you embark on treatment. It is a good idea to check on the terms of consent, including how long the donor has agreed to their sperm or any embryos created from them being stored.

Where can I get help and support?

The decision about whether to use donated sperm, eggs or embryos is an important one, with life-long implications. There are many issues to consider, some of which are complicated. Before coming to a final decision it is recommended that you have some sessions with the clinic counsellor. They will have a great deal of knowledge and expertise about donation. These sessions can be particularly helpful in explaining how your decision to use donated sperm, eggs or embryos may affect your relationship with your partner, if you have one. It will also allow you consider your relationship with any child you may have.

Find out more

The following HFEA publications contain information that may be useful if you are thinking about donor conception.

The HFEA Guide to Infertility
Embryo storage
Egg donation
Consent to the use of storage of gametes and embryos
Welfare of the child

The HFEA cannot be held responsible for any advice given or the content of web sites where links are shown. The organisations within this list are entirely independent of the HFEA and we do not endorse their content.

Organisations

These organisations may be able to help you if you have specific queries about donor conception.

Donor Conception Network. A national support group for people who have conceived through donation and those considering it. They can give you advice and support and also the chance to meet parents with donor-conceived children. Call 020 8245 4369 or visit www.dcnetwork.org

National Gamete Donation Trust. A national government-funded charity set up to raise awareness of and seek ways to alleviate the national shortage of sperm, egg and

embryo donors. It provides useful publications for donors and recipients including information on donation and the law. Helpline call 0845 226 9193 or visit www.ngdt.co.uk

British Infertility Counselling Association (BICA). The professional association for infertility counsellors and counselling in the UK. Its website includes a list of counsellors providing services and a downloadable leaflet on choosing a counsellor. Call Tel 0114 263 1448 or visit www.bica.net

Infertility Network UK (INUK). The largest network in the UK offering information and advice by phone and face-to-face. It has groups throughout the country and also produces a range of publications on infertility. Tel: 08701 188088 or visit www.infertilitynetworkuk.com

Websites

Fertility Friends. An active self-help community for people experiencing the pain of infertility. Useful site featuring message board and live chat room. Visit www.fertilityfriends.co.uk

May-b-baby. UK infertility support website set up by Deanne Jenkyns, who herself is infertile. Helpful site with message boards, personal stories and information. Visit www.may-b-baby.co.uk

Fertility Stories. Another site set up by someone with personal experience of infertility, Research, articles and personal stories including information on egg and sperm donation. Visit www.fertilitystories.com