

Submission to Senate Inquiry into Past and Present Practices of Donor Conception in Australia 2010

As parents of two donor-conceived children, we offer the following submission as part of the Senate Inquiry into the past & present practices of Donor Conception in Australia.

Our personal experiences

Our donor conceived daughters are now 10½ (born Feb 2000) and nearly 8 (born Dec 2002). We told them the story of their donor conception from an early age. They appreciate that “a kind man donated his sperm, as daddy didn’t have any sperm”. We see this as an evolving story, not simply something they are told and then not discussed again. As they grow and develop, different questions will emerge, as will the need for further information and, in the process, new levels of understanding.

We currently have the following information about our donor, provided by the Reproductive Biology Unit at the Royal Women’s Hospital, Melbourne as we embarked on our donor conception journey in 1999:

- age (he was apx 48 when our first child was born) and physical characteristics (height, build, hair colour/type, blood group, eye colour, skin colour)
- racial origin, country of birth
- level reached in secondary school, tertiary qualifications
- occupation
- interests/hobbies
- sporting abilities and achievements
- marital status, family structure and nationality for 2 generations
- cultural interests/achievements; artistic/musical/creative skills

The donor described his personality/temperament as “open, warm, good under pressure, strong, get things done, man of my word”. When asked his attitude/philosophy in life, he responded with “aspire to a happy peaceful, joyous and prosperous life”. His reason for donating was that he “wanted to give back”. That is essentially all the information we have (although we recognize many donor conceived children around Australia don’t even have this much information about their donor).

When we last checked, our daughters had seven half siblings conceived with the same donor (more children may have been born since then). At the time of donating, the donor did not have any children of his own. A few years ago, we registered interest (via the voluntary register with the ITA) in making contact with any families of our children’s half siblings, but have not received a response.

Whilst we are very grateful for the information we do have, there are clearly some gaps. For example:

- Nothing known about educational experiences in primary/secondary school and any potential learning difficulties/challenges
- Lack of an easily accessible full family medical history (i.e. information on the paternal side is unknown e.g. allergies, eczema etc...). We can assume there would have been screening for genetic medical conditions as part of the donation process.
- Names and information about half siblings (we can find out gender and year of birth)

As our girls grow, they have and will naturally ask more questions:

- Who do I look like?
- Where do my brown eyes come from?
- What does the donor look like?
- What kind of person is he?
- Do my half siblings look like me? What are they like? Can I meet them?
- (and inevitably later) Is this boy I am attracted to my half sibling? Are we related?

We will encourage our daughters to seek identifying information about the donor when they turn 18, and make contact with him, when and if, they are ready (assuming he is still alive and willing). At this stage, they cannot obtain either non identifying or identifying information about their half siblings.

Our concerns

1. We feel fortunate that our children were conceived and born in Victoria where current legislation provides access to identifying information about their donor when they reach the age of 18. We strongly believe that this should be the right of all donor-conceived people no matter which state or territory in Australia they were born and no matter when they were born.
2. It is worrying that donor conceived people are the only group of people in Australia who have information about their biological parentage deliberately kept from them by organisations and governments. The denial of this information can be psychologically harmful to donor-conceived people. It may also be detrimental to their physical wellbeing by preventing them from having a full family medical history.
3. Donor conceived children (and their parents) should be able to access reasonable information about their genetic half-siblings. Although our initial efforts have been unsuccessful, we will continue to pursue the options available through the voluntary register in Victoria.

Our request

We ask that the Committee recommend the following:

1. The Federal Government enact legislation to give all Australian donor conceived people the right to have access to all available information on their donors.
2. Donor conceived people should also have access to information about their half siblings, both from donor conception and from the donor's own family.
3. That there is an addendum to the birth certificates of donor conceived people so that they can know how they were conceived.
4. Counselling must be a mandatory part of donor conception programmes as it is in adoption.
5. A limit be placed on the number of families that can use the gametes of one donor – this must be absolutely no more than 5 including the donor's own family, preferably less.
6. A national donor conception register be established and maintained.

We would be happy to provide further information in support of this submission and to participate in a public hearing.

(Names withheld)
Melbourne