To the Senate Inquiry into Donor Conception .

Our names are Warren and Leonie Hewitt, we are the parents of three donor conceived children, 27, 22 and 20.

All of our children were told at a young age about their conception as we wanted to raise our children with openness and honesty. We didn't want to have any secrets in our family.

When Warren was told he was infertile, he was given this news over the phone by a specialist, he then spent the next two hours wandering the streets of Sydney in a daze. Warren arrived home from work that night and told me the sad news he was given and he offered me a divorce. There was no support for him to deal with this loss and his infertility, he was expected to just get on with his life.

Of course we didn't get divorced and we have been married for 37 years.

Warren and I had been attending the Royal Hospital for Women (RHW) at Paddington at this time and we were told our only options were adoption or AID as it was called in the old days. I didn't even know what AID was and had to have it explained to me. I rejected this option and went away with the thought of adopting. We filled out the forms for adoption and there was a ten year waiting period.

Life went on.

Thirteen months later I read an article on AID and showed it to Warren. We decided to go ahead and try it. Warren never pressured me to have AID .It was to be our decision together.
We made an appointment at the clinic at RHW. We had a one hour session of counselling. I remember there was no discussion about the effects of secrecy and how it would affect our family over the lifespan.

After a few inseminations, we were lucky to pregnant and we very happy to be having our first child. We had an excellent Gyno called Dr Graeme Hughes, when I was about 7 months pregnant I asked him if he had donor children would he tell them they were donor children. Graeme replied yes he would. Having a Doctor who also believed in openness, it reinforced our respect for him and gave me comfort. Also at that time I knew in my heart that we had to disclose the truth to our child.

Most if not all doctors who worked in clinics at this time advocated that children didn't need to know. Dr Hughes views were very uncommon amongst his peers. We really appreciate his support over the years. He assisted in all their births.

As a Victorian State ward who had been raised in an orphanage for 13 years, I never knew my background; I met my biological father at 15 yrs old and last saw my mother at 11yrs of age. I knew the effects and the struggles of finding my identity and I didn't want our children to suffer in the same way. Also I was raised by nuns to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth (so help me God). I could never live with myself if I had to lie to my children. The burden would have been too great for my emotional well being.

As the children grew older we faced the issues of when to tell them about their donor conception. We went to a support group called Concern looking for people who had similar attitudes to our family regarding openness. Whilst we did meet other donor families, we were disappointed that they were going to maintain the family secret.

Concern was going to fold, so I joined the committee and took on the workload of running a support group. I had no experience other than commitment to find other donor families who wanted to tell their children about their conception.

Two years went by and we didn't find another family in Concern like ours who wanted to tell their children.

We were dealing with the clinic to find information about our children's donors. We hit many, many brick walls and negative attitudes, it was a prolonged struggle over many years to fight for our children's rights to know their donors.

Warren and I made appointments with the CEO of the RHW. Debra Thoms was a breath of fresh air, she understood what we were trying to achieve and she told us that she had a friend who was adopted. At one interview at the hospital we turned up with photos of our three children on the table and among many questions we stated if you don't answer our questions then you will have to answer our children's questions in the future.

Finally, after many letters, meetings and lobbying the RHW, with the support of the new CEO David White and a change in attitudes, the RHW introduced a voluntary register. Our family willingly did media in the Sunday Telegraph. It was really wonderful after the long and protracted battle we achieved a donor register for people to update their medical histories and current addresses at our clinic.

Sadly not many people know about this register today as it's hidden somewhere on the main website of the RHW Randwick.

In 1992 we had three children by this time and we were going to the RHW clinic for the annual Christmas party. I spoke to the infertility counsellor, Judy Bebe about starting up a support network for donor families. Judy was supportive and we asked those attending if they would come to a meeting in January 1993 at the Hewitt house in Georges Hall NSW.

Over the years I kept any newspaper articles dealing with donor issues, I was hungry for knowledge and information on how other families dealt with the issues of telling their children.

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Caroline and Patrice Lorbach a donor family were interviewed regarding the shortage of donors in a Sydney newspaper, I traced them through an Uncle of Patrice's and told them about the forming of a support group.

At the first meeting in January 1993, we had 22 adults and 11 children and the Donor Insemination Support Group (DISG) of Australia was formed at Georges Hall. There were many suggestions for a name of the group including the 'wounded willies'.

Caroline and Patrice attended this first meeting, along with Michelle Cefai.

At long last Warren and I met other parents like us.

How wonderful it was to know of others who didn't want to live a lifetime of secrecy and shame

Finally I knew our family wasn’t different at all. There were others with the same thoughts and feelings as our family.

The support the DISG has given on a voluntary basis since 1993 to people across Australia and overseas should not be underestimated.

There was no internet like there is today. There were very few books or articles written on openness. Donor Insemination was shrouded in secrecy and many people who worked in clinics around Australia believed this was the only way for a family to raise the child.
The four families who have kept the Donor Conception Support Group of Australia established need to be acknowledged for the support and commitment they have provided to donors, recipient parents and all donor conceived people across Australia. Our family is very appreciative to Caroline and Patrice, Michelle, Liz and Ken for the support they have given to our family

However, the four families have also given support to thousands of Australians involved in Donor Conception and to clinics and their staff as well.
At the same time as working outside the home and raising their families, the four families have never received a cent in wages in the 17 years. It is vital that if the DCSG is to continue with the work of supporting families, funding will be needed to keep this excellent resource into the future.

Regarding past practices of donor conception

In the past donor clinics weren't governed by any legislation, only limited guidelines. Clinics seemed to be only answerable to themselves. We have provided the committee with information on our family's struggle to get any information for our children on their donors. There was no legal requirement for clinics to maintain records on donors.
Hence out of our three children, two are able to know and communicate with their donors .Sadly our eldest has been unable to obtain any meaningful information about her donor. Her donor's records were destroyed. This saddens us as her parents.

We would like the committee to make a recommendation to establish a National Donor Registry, so that all parties can have the opportunity to connect. A national register will aid in preventing donors from donating at multiple clinics across Australia.
As one of our children has 31 half siblings - Our donor donated in two states. Our other two children have 4 half siblings each.

None of our children have met or have any information regarding their half siblings. With a national registry, hopefully this situation could be remedied. With regards to consanguinity we hope that our three children will not form a sexual relationship with one of the 39 half siblings. Who is accountable if this situation occurs?

The national donor registry should be funded to conduct media campaigns to encourage all donors and recipient families to come forward and give updated medical histories. The Registry should have counsellors who are experienced in infertility issues and as well the importance of birth origin information and the issues. The registrar would need to be able to do DNA testing as many of the records have been lost or destroyed.

Currently the Federal government have committed 26.5 million dollars for a Find and Connect service for State Wards to trace their records and lost families. This service could be extended to assist all parties in donor conception (I have enclosed a flyer).

Payment of donors

Currently people who donate blood in Australia do not get paid. Our position on payment for donors is that they also shouldn't be paid for their gametes.

Counselling prior to treatment

Everyone involved in donor conception, should be required to undergo mandatory counselling, with discussions on the importance of raising a child without secrets. We need to be aware of the effects on families' long term mental health.

Some other issues in Donor Conception

I would like to raise the issue of one donor child I am aware of who was made a NSW State Ward.

When a donor conceived child becomes a state ward, it is then the responsibility of the government to assist this child to form it's identity, self concept, as well as it's medical history. How will the state governments of Australia assist this category of donor children?

I would also like to suggest that there are possibilities for genetically matching full and half siblings who have been conceived by Donor Conception. Currently every baby in Australia since the 1960's has been screened for PKU and their genetic material is stored in Canberra. With such a comprehensive genetic database, appropriate testing could be carried out to establish genetic links between Donor conceived children.

Conclusion

Australia has signed the United Nations Rights of the Child convention, however we do not abide or live up to our international treaties. The UN Convention on the rights of the Child state that governments have an obligation to provide children with an identity. Millions of taxpayers' dollars have gone and still go into the reproductive technology industry and there must be some accountability.

Having our three children was a wonderful way to have a family and we are grateful to the RHW and the donors who have helped create our family - we look forward to the day we can meet them and thank them face to face for our precious gifts. In hindsight I wish I had gone to Victoria for treatment as they had a register. We hope that your committee will make a recommendation to set up a National Donor Register as soon as possible and show leadership to safeguard and respect the human rights of all Donor Conceived People/Children of Australia.

Thank you for taking this late submission.

Best Wishes and Hooroo,

Warren and Leonie Hewitt.