

Who requests their sperm donor's identity? The first ten years of information releases to adults with open-identity donors

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Objective: To report findings from 10 years of requests from adults eligible to obtain their open-identity sperm donor's information.

Design: Analysis of archived family and donor data. Semistructured interviews at information releases.

Setting: Not applicable.

Patient(s): A total of 85 DI adults requesting 43 donor identities; program data on 256 DI families.

Intervention(s): None.

Main Outcome Measure(s): We identified [1] demographic predictors of requesting donor identities, [2] information release timing and length, and [3] request motives.

Result(s): Just >35% of eligible DI adults requested their donor's identity. Adults ranged from 18–27 years, requesting at median age 18 years. More women than men requested. Proportionally fewer adults requested when they had heterosexual-couple parents, and proportionally more when they had one rather than two parents. In interviews, the common theme was wanting to know more about the donor, especially about shared characteristics. Most adults planned to contact their donor. More than 94% of adults had donors who were open to contact; adults expressed modest expectations about this contact.

Conclusion(s): In 2001, the first adults became eligible to obtain their open-identity sperm donor's information. Ten years of identity requests at one program indicates that information about one's donor is important to a significant proportion of these DI adults. Most requested their donor's identity soon after becoming eligible, suggesting some urgency to wanting the information. Interview data highlighted the role of donor information in helping adults better understand themselves and their ancestry. Findings hold important implications for practice and policy. (Fertil Steril® 2016; ■ : ■ – ■ . ©2016 by American Society for Reproductive Medicine.)

Key Words: Open-identity donation, information sharing, third-party family building, sperm donors

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Open-identity donation began in the United States in 1982 at a nonprofit donor insemination (DI) program that primarily served female same-sex couples and single women (1). At present more than one-third of US DI programs offer open-identity donors, with the proportion of

donors who opt to be (eventually) identifiable increasing with the length of time that a program has existed (2, 3). Open-identity donors in the United States typically provide extensive non-identifying information for recipients and, when the offspring reach age 18 years, provide their name, and

sometimes other identifying and locating information to offspring who request it.

The increasing number of open-identity programs in the United States appears associated with increased parental intent to disclose and desire for their children to have the option to know who the donor is and perhaps meet him. This holds for families parented by heterosexual couples (4, 5), as well as single women and female same-sex couples where children will eventually question why no father is present. Having an open-identity donor can make discussions about the family's origins easier, because children have the option at adulthood to seek

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information about questions their parents cannot answer. It also spares DI individuals the frustration of never being able to know more about the donor (e.g., Refs. [6–11]). The connection also appears elsewhere. In the Netherlands, Brewaeyts et al. (12) found that when offered a choice of donor types, heterosexual couples who planned to tell their child chose open-identity donors 93% of the time, whereas those who did not plan to disclose chose these donors only 17% of the time (see also Ref. 4). In Sweden, Leeb-Lundberg et al. (13) found that most parents who had disclosed or planned to would have chosen an open-identity sperm donor if they had that choice.

Despite more people choosing open-identity donation, or being required to use it, such as in jurisdictions internationally that forbid anonymous donation (14), little is known about the experiences of DI adults who have open-identity donors and seek their information. It is not clear how many DI adults request their donor's information, what proportion will go on to contact the donor, and how having identifying information for and/or contact with the donor affects the DI adults, their donors and their respective families. Research indicates that DI children, adolescents, and adults want donor information. They want to know what he is like, what he looks like, whether he shares characteristics with them, and his medical history (e.g., Refs. [15–19]). Other DI persons are interested not only in the donor, but also in individuals who share their donor (19–23). A consistent theme across these studies is the desire to make connections with genetically related individuals and the information they hold. All of this reveals the significance attributed to the donor and genetic origins by DI people and suggests that this information may help contribute to their identity formation and psychological well-being (24).

Until now, DI adult experiences with open-identity donation remain relatively unexplored, because few programs worldwide have offspring old enough to obtain their donor's identifying information (14). In addition to the US program (The Sperm Bank of California, first offspring born 1983), the oldest programs are in Sweden (1985), Austria (1992), Victoria state, Australia (1998), and New Zealand (1990s). Although follow-up research is ongoing (e.g., Refs. [25–30]), it is hampered by few donor identity requests by eligible adults. Many of these adults may not even know of their family's donor origins (25). Efforts are underway to change this (30), but follow-up is challenging. The one exception has been in the United States at The Sperm Bank of California where families are comparatively open with their children about the family's origins (4, 31), and many DI adults have obtained their open-identity donor's information.

PRESENT STUDY

In the present study, we focus on experiences at one US open-identity program at The Sperm Bank of California to examine three research questions: [1] To what extent do DI adults use their option to obtain their open-identity donor's information? [2] Why do requesting adults want their donor's information? [3] Can an open-identity program provide adults with the donor information they

request? To do this, we followed the first 10-year cohort of DI adults who were eligible for their donor's identifying information.

By working with one DI program we could identify the sample of eligible adult offspring and then calculate the proportion who actually made a request. We also examined demographic predictors, such as gender and family type, that might indicate which offspring are more likely to request their donor's identity. Because previous research in adoption suggests that more women than men seek genetic origins information (32–34), we examine whether this trend extends to the current group of DI adults. Whereas Scheib et al. (19) did not find a gender bias in interest in a donor's identity among a subsample of the 10-year cohort of adults when they were adolescents, it is possible that a bias would emerge in a larger sample. Findings from other donor conception studies are mixed, with many showing a similar female-bias among adult searchers (6, 7, 18, 21) and one showing the opposite among 7- to 17-year olds raised in female same-sex-couple households (35).

We also examined whether interest in donor information is linked to the type of family in which one was raised. Earlier research with the 10-year cohort subsample of adolescents indicated that, in comparison to youths with two parents (heterosexual or female same-sex), those with single mothers expressed more interest in the donor (19). Parents from these families expressed positive feelings about possible identity releases, but the fathers tended to be the least enthusiastic (31). This is in line with previous DI family research that finds differences between mothers and fathers regarding anonymity and desire for information about the donor, a generally more fearful view of sperm donor conception among heterosexual couples, and greater difficulty in disclosing for men (36–41). In the present study, we examined whether adults raised by two parents, regardless of parental sexual orientation, are less likely to request their donor's identity, at least initially at age 18 years. We also examined whether there might be fewer requests from adults raised by heterosexual-couple parents, in part, because they are less likely to be aware of their donor conception. Among the 10-year cohort subsample, fewer DI adolescents raised by heterosexual couples knew about their origins compared to single and lesbian-couple families (31).

In addition to examining who makes requests, we identified the rate at which requests were made (i.e., proportion requesting and at what age), how long information releases took, and donor openness to contact from DI adults. Finally, interview data from the release process allowed us to explore adult motivations to learn more about the donor, and whether they were interested in contacting him.

Findings are relevant to researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and families involved with donor conception. To our knowledge, this is the first study to provide outcome information about open-identity donation, including DI adult experiences and whether a program can successfully provide donor identifying information. As important, identifying shortcomings in information releases can assist other open-identity

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