

**Sperm donors – moving out of the shadows.
Contact and connection between former sperm donors and their offspring -
experiences and perspectives.**

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Abstract

This article explores the views and experiences of former sperm donors regarding their motivations in becoming donors, their experiences since being donors (including in several cases contact with some of their offspring), and views on potential changes to legislation which would remove anonymity of pre-1988 sperm donors. Adding to these stories is a personal reflection by the author - traversing 25 years: from altruistic action as a sperm donor; through realization of the existence of offspring from those donations and preliminary contact with one of those young people, to political and social activism to enable connection of donor conceived people with their biological parents. The article concludes with a brief reflection on the commonalties between sperm donors and birth fathers. While a small sample, these stories begin to fill a space in which there has been both a paucity of information and many assumptions made about donor's opinions. Far from being fearful of the removal of anonymity the past sperm donors whose views are reported here will welcome and embrace such change.

Biographical notes

Ian Smith is a former sperm donor who is active in working to raise awareness of issues regarding donor conception and working for change to legislation and practice concerning the anonymity of pre-1988 donors. Ian regularly speaks at seminars, gives media interviews and writes submissions and opinion pieces on these topics. Ian was instrumental in bringing together former sperm donors to form the *Melbourne Anonymous Donors "MADMen"* – members of which group have been interviewed for this article. The former sperm donors who were interviewed and whose stories are reported here are: Charles B.; Roger Clarke; Peter Liston; Michael Linden; Paul R.; Wayne Thompson; Ray Tonna.

Introduction

*"We were never supposed to be real people –
just nice men with more sperm than we needed ...".*

Like the birth fathers of adopted children, sperm donors have been for the most part unseen figures in the complex triangle of donor assisted reproduction. The words of one sperm donor, quoted above, express the shadowy place which sperm donors occupied - particularly in the period from the early 1970s to the mid 1980's when donor assisted conception in Australia was pushing boundaries and exploring new medico-scientific territory. At that time both donors and recipient families were encouraged to think of sperm donors as sources of a key, but anonymous and hidden, ingredient to conception. Conception achieved, the recipients were routinely told to forget that this had ever happened. Likewise the sperm donors, their purpose served, were thanked and sent on their way with encouragement to put this out of their minds.

As awareness has grown of the impact of separation from family of origin— through adoption or donor conception – there has been increasing attention on the need for donor conceived people to know their biological heritage. For people conceived from gamete donations prior to 1988 this has been particularly difficult as tight rules of donor anonymity prevailed at that time. The voices of sperm donors have not often been heard in public debate on this issue. In their place members of the medical profession and of the media have often assumed and expressed views and opinions on behalf sperm donors. A typical theme of these expressions is that sperm donors have forgotten about what they did, are not concerned about the offspring resulting from their donations, are afraid of either embarrassment or family disruption, and are fearful of claims for financial or other support from their offspring. Two examples of assertions by doctors which assume to know sperm donor's views can be seen in recent comments by Professors Handelsman, Kovacs and McBain¹.

Such views, however, are the minority in donor submissions and evidence² to recent Parliamentary inquires³ into identification of biological parents/sperm donors. The majority of submissions and evidence given by sperm donors to those parliamentary inquiries show a very different point of view⁴. It is evident that many donors have not forgotten the people they helped to create, and that they welcome contact if that is what their offspring desire. Former sperm donors are increasingly emerging from the shadowy place to which they were consigned and are speaking up in favour of the removal of anonymity and facilitation of contact with their biological children⁵.

Donor perspectives – the views of *MADMen* and others.

The experience of being a sperm donor, at least in the 1970s and 1980s, was isolating. Men were given a sterile jar, sent off to a private room to produce a semen sample, and then they were gone. Sperm donation has not generally been a topic of general day-to-day or dinner party conversation, so sperm donors tended to not meet other men with whom they had a shared experience.

¹ "Allow sperm donors the right to maintain their past anonymity", <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/allow-sperm-donors-the-right-to-maintain-their-past-anonymity-20130507-2j5o4.html>

"Sperm donor law must put child first, says Naphthine", <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/sperm-donor-law-must-put-child-first-says-naphthine-20130615-2ob4n.html>

"Why the promise to sperm donors must be honoured"
<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/why-the-promise-to-sperm-donors-must-be-honoured-20120410-1wmus.html>

² See for example: http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lawrefrom/donor-conceived/DCP13-Name_withheld.pdf

³ This article primarily concerns and refers to donor conception practice in Victoria, Australia.

⁴ See for example: http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lawrefrom/donor-conceived/DCP24-Paul_Ruff.pdf and http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lawrefrom/iadcpiad/DCP_Final_Report.pdf pp. 27-28 & 69- 70.

⁵ See for example: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/why-i-regret-donating-my-sperm/2007/08/26/1188066937323.html?page=fullpage> and <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/sperm-donor-steps-up-for-offspring-who-want-to-know-20121208-2b2ej.html>

MADMEN – Melbourne Anonymous Donors – is a loose group of former sperm donors who met and connected through the *Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority (VARTA)*. The group came together following a process of consultation with sperm and egg donors which was commissioned by the Victorian Government (following the *Victorian Parliamentary Law Reform Committee's* recommendation to allow all donor-conceived people access to their donor's identity). Advertising and media articles encouraging donors to participate in the consultation brought forward a significant response (believed to be more than 40 people; the exact number is not known until the Victorian Government releases the report of the consultations). When former sperm donors contacted *VARTA* they were, in addition to being enrolled for the consultation, offered the option of speaking with another former donor (the author). Some of those who took up that offer decided to meet to share experiences and perspectives. From that first meeting – in January 2013 – the *MADMEN* group formed. *MADMEN* spans a range of experiences – men who have met and have ongoing relationships with their biological offspring, those who know something of their offspring, and those who have no knowledge at all of any offspring. A universally expressed feeling in the group is that is that these men have not forgotten their actions as sperm donors, nor the human consequences of those actions.

Stories from Sperm Donors

Seven former sperm donors – four of whom have met at least one of their biological children – share their stories here. These men were sperm donors prior to the 1988 change in legislation regarding anonymity – the earliest in 1977, the latest in 1987. They donated sperm at Victorian hospitals: *Epworth, Royal Women's, and Prince Henry's*; and in New South Wales, *Camperdown Women's Hospital*. Their ages at the time ranged from mid 20's to mid 30's. Some had partners and children at the time, some not.

Motivations

For some the motivation was altruism – the desire to help families who wanted to have children but who could not.

- *I heard a professor – Kovacs or de Kretser – speak at a medical conference calling for volunteers*
- *My wife heard an interview with Dr Gab Kovacs on ABC radio*
- *A tiny effort on my part, for massive benefit of donees.*
- *These people wanted to create a life – I could help.*
- *Here were people wanting help from others ... I gave the gift of life.*

For some though, altruism was not the motivator (or at least not the only one).

- *The money - \$10 each time – was a motivator. It was paltry sum but I was a student. Frankly it was for the money, and a bit of lark...*
- *I was student and the money was a motivator...*

Another donor was motivated by thoughts of genetic succession:

- *I liked the idea that there would be a continuation of my family line. I saw three wins – I get succession, the family gets a child, the donor conceived person gets a life.*

Informed consent?

For all of the donors represented here a long time has passed since the time they were sperm donors. Recollections of the degree to which informed consent was sought or given are hazy. Some felt they were informed of, and understood, the consequences of what they were doing at the time.

- *Yes, I understood what I was doing.*
- *I understood what the implications were ...*

Most felt, to the contrary.

- *There was not a lot of information provided ...*
- *There was a group information session [for prospective donors] – I don't recall anything of what we were told at the session.*
- *There was a bit of counselling ...*
- *By today's standards the level of information was quite rudimentary ... there was no formal orientation or counselling made available. Nobody discussed the possibilities that might eventuate in the next 20 or so years. The whole subject was taboo. ... I understood what I was getting into and, for the time, I believed I understood the consequences of my choices and actions.*
- *I can't say that I did fully understand the consequences [of sperm donation] – I'm still informing myself now.*

Interestingly, several of the men reported that they were left with an impression that their sperm may just be used for research – and not to make babies.

- *They left a cloud of uncertainty – the sense I got was: “don't worry – there may not be any babies, this may just be used for research ...”*

Anonymity

In the current debate around potential changes to laws regarding anonymity of pre-1988 sperm donors medical professionals, in particular make much of the promise of anonymity given at that time. However, the experiences reported here (and those of the author) are somewhat different.

- *Anonymity was not a promise made to me... There was no choice. It was a condition of joining up. Basically, it was "give us what we want and then get lost". Don't call us, we won't call you. The requirement for anonymity was a disappointment – but I accepted that.*
- *I remember not being too happy about never finding out if there were any offspring. That was a strict rule they had, or you could not be part of the program.*
- *Anonymity was assumed – I was not put in a position of choosing.*
- *... you give, you go – no info re those you have helped. If you want to participate, those are the rules ... total anonymity.*
- *Anonymity was stressed [by the clinic] – I took away the strong message that I was not to be interfering with the [recipient] family*

Variant practice is apparent between different clinics. On the one hand:

- *Anonymity a pre-requisite for my signing up as a sperm donor? – no.*

but on the other hand:

- *Anonymity a pre-requisite for my signing up as a sperm donor? – absolutely!*

Thoughts of the children born?

For some of the sperm donors the thought of children potentially born was always present.

- *There has never been a time when I have ever forgotten about the children that I helped produce. During my time on the program I was kept informed of the number of children that were born as a result of my donations, a little about their parents too. I was given this information in a fairly informal way and only because I asked for it. ...*
- *There have always been moments over the years when I wondered about these children and how they were doing. I quietly cared about them. I have never had an expectation of meeting them but knew that it might happen ...*
- *It never dropped from my mind but I held no hope of meeting my children – as much as I would have loved to. In an Age article I read that a donor knew he had several children. My enquiries led to me finding I also had three children.*
- *Always in the back of my mind though not obsessively. I'd resigned myself to never knowing based on the information provided back then. It all came back when I read an article in the Age a few years back and learned that the rules may be changing. I subsequently joined the N.S.W. and Victorian registries*
- *It never went out of my mind – but thinking about it was not a daily occurrence. I guessed at how many may have been born. The thinking took off when I got real information about how many had been born, and that one – a twin - had died as a premature baby.*
- *I have often thought – how are they, where are they? May I be passing them [in the street]?*
- *Would like to know more, anything more. Appearance, career, whether family still together, health, well being...*

For others – partly because of the uncertainties noted above - it slipped from mind until circumstances changed. For two donors the awareness of offspring was brought later brought back to mind dramatically.

- *In the mid 90's there was mention in the media about the law possibly changing to enable donors to be identified. My feeling was – I'll see what happens. I never felt threatened. I had some curiosity as to what the adult children born, now adults, were like. ... And then, in 2011 there was a story in the Australian [newspaper] with a picture of M. and a reference to her sibling. I knew immediately that M. was my daughter.*
- *There was no deliberate attempt to cover up – I just put it out of my mind, I just forgot. Once in a blue moon I thought of it – when I did I think of it I thought “That child must be in a loving family” that was the only thought I could hang onto. - Sometimes I made jokes – “There could be more of me out there”. And then the letter [from Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages] came, and wow! ... This was one of two major moments in my life!”*

For one sperm donor the connection with his – previously unknown – biological daughter was a “light bulb moment” revealing a family previously unknown.

- *These people [the other donor offspring] are family – I hope to be in contact one day, but who knows.*

Contact – actual or potential

Six of the sperm donors know that offspring have been born. They know how many, their gender and when they were born - some also have a little information on the families the children were born into. One donor though has been able to find no information at all. Four have had contact with some of their biological children.

- *Many times I wondered what had happened. Eventually, after I pushed, I was informed ... three girls and a boy.*
- *After seeing the story in the newspaper I initiated contact straight away...there were mediated letters and emails and then we met ... I later met M's brother - my son ... on his 18th birthday.*
- *I have had contact from two; a young man and young woman. The two contacts were four years apart.*
- *I am now connected with two of my [donor conceived] daughters – one made contact several years ago and one just very recently.*
- *[As] the probability of contact became more realistic. I found myself thinking that, yes, I might have contact one day soon; how should I react, what would I say?*

Feelings of responsibility to allow and enable contact, if required, were apparent.

- *I have always felt that the rights and wishes of the donor-conceived child should be paramount. I have never feared contact but only if it is acceptable to both parties.*
- *Men who have, by donating sperm, created children should accept the responsibility to allow themselves to be known – if that is what their offspring desire.*
- *I would like to assist, if they want me to assist. If I can assist my kids in any way, hey, I hope they contact me.*
- *I have always accepted full responsibility for donating and for the downstream consequences. This means understanding that, like adopted children, the urge and right to know about their biology is all important, that I would never deny a child their right to make contact with me and know me in any way they need to know me. That meant full frontal, face to face contact with open discussion and lots of questions.*

In all four instances of donor and child connection it has been a profound experience for the men to meet their previously unknown offspring.

- *[My daughter] and I clicked straight off, I was blown away. She is left handed, vegetarian, artistic. Our letters and emails were emotional enough, meeting was love at first sight...the degree of attraction was unsettling. The relationships with [my daughter and son] are different – with [my son] the relationship is chummy, a buddy. He pops up and sees me occasionally.*
- *When the letter came I thought "Wow, there is a person out there!" I gained a daughter, my son gained a sister. Three months ago my life was turned upside down. When the letter came...*
- *Once I knew she was there, nothing could have stopped me meeting her. The emotion on meeting ... was such a high. I couldn't believe the feelings ... this person is my daughter. ... I felt so proud of my beautiful daughter.*
- *Both have been intensely enriching experiences and both have been quite different. The young man was very keen to meet me from a very early age... He knew from a very early age about his biology and set out to contact me soon after his 18th birthday. The experience for both of us was intriguing. Both of us*

had no idea where we would go after the first day of meeting ... We have since met regularly At every turn ... we strive to normalise what we have as a relationship. [My biological daughter] is a much more sensitive soul and entered the quest to meet me with fairly low expectations. I welcomed her enquiry with warmth and a smile. She was taken aback that a get-together was possible and that we might begin an ongoing friendship – which we have. I have found my relationship with her to be more intense than with [my biological son]. She has shared so much of her life's stories and questions with me ... has wanted to know more about my family and my background. Again, we have established ourselves as good friends.

- *[My biological daughter] made contact several years ago and she has lived with my family, in a father/daughter relationship for some time. A daughter is a daughter and I was prepared to be a father if that is what she wanted. When contact was first made I let her decide what relationship was wanted. The experience was like squeezing 20 years into 3 years – very strong bonding followed by pushing away, all compressed into a very intense period.*

What name to use for sperm donors?

There is no established and agreed terminology to use to describe the relationship of sperm donor to their offspring.

- *To both ... I am their biological father. I am introduced to their friends this way. No other name has been considered. Although [my biological son] just calls me one of his mates. As he explains, "it's no big deal, R. is not my Dad. He has never yelled at me to do my homework or clean up my room. My Dad is my Dad and R. is a good mate."*
- *From a legal point of view probably 'biological father' but for the children 'uncle'?*
- *"Donor" is easier to say. "Biological father" may be threatening to a parent considering telling their children.*
- *"Real father" is the extreme and somewhat provocative option – "biological father" perhaps less provocative.*
- *"Biological father" and "step or social father". The biological father can claim credit for creating the person – the social father for raising them.*
- *"Donor seems so clinical – I don't want to be talked about as "donor" – that is something like a laboratory rat, from which pieces are harvested. {My biological daughter} called me "Papa R." ... I would simply like to be called the "other father".*

Attitudes to proposed changes to Victorian legislation to remove anonymity for pre-1988 donors.

The former donors were asked their view of this legislation. All supported the changes.

- *I think it is appropriate that every human being should understand their biological roots. I realise that this may be confronting for some individuals, but I think the issue is one of basic human rights. I hope that the legislation goes through and that the doors open on this issue for the sake of the donor-conceived children. How does a donor-conceived child imagine what his or her father might be like? They deserve to know.*
- *My position ... is simple: children must retain the right to know their biological heritage. And this must over-ride the previously guarded anonymity enjoyed by donors.*

- *I fully support the intent of this law ... it will remove a current lack of justice and clarity [and] enable both parties to share information. I agree with the protection afforded by a contact veto... to allow information about donor to be released but to also allow the donor to have the option to manage the degree of contact – which maybe - as they desire.*
- *I strongly support this change. Contact vetoes – from donors perspective gives a feeling of some control – not having to go “all the way”, but from the donor conceived persons perspective this is just cruel. The donor conceived person’s needs should be paramount – so “no” to the contact veto.*

Being a sperm donor – with the benefit of hindsight, would you do it again?

Opinions varied.

- *Would I do this again? – clearly not! It was the wrong thing to do ... an abuse of human rights to purposefully create children who are separated from their biological parents.*
- *I would be willing to do this again – but only if I was able to do apply conditions – particularly regarding the stability of the recipient family.*
- *Yes, [but only] if more information was available and if I could meet the kids.*

Reflections and observations

Given the opportunity to offer other comment on the experience of being a sperm donor - for some donors, the family circumstances of the offspring was a concern, other comments reflected on the experience of being a sperm donor.

- *At the time of donating I remember thinking that responsibility went ‘with the act’. This troubled me a bit as I had no control over the resulting births or lives of donor-conceived.*
- *I expected that the family a donor conceived child was going into would be solid – now I know that that is not always so.*
- *When I donated I wasn’t sure how I would meet this responsibility [of contact from offspring], how would I feel about them meeting me? What could I add to their lives? What sort of relationship might be created? It took 18 years to find out.*
- *My story is overwhelmingly positive. I was never ashamed of being a donor although in the 1980s it was not dinner table conversation. It is now. I could never have known then what a positive change it would make to the lives of two young individuals who now happily declare, among other things, that they now know why they have wavy brown hair and why they are hopeless at maths.*
- *There are three other young people out there with my genes who may make similar discoveries if they know they are donor-conceived and want to find out more about the other 50% of their biology. I will turn their enquiry into as much a positive experience for them as it has been for me.*

One sperm donor’s journey – a personal stock-take: From altruism to activism.

As author of this article my understanding and engagement with this topic is underpinned by deep personal and emotional engagement. My becoming a sperm donor – while seemingly a simple action of altruism at the time – led me into a deep examination of the consequences of my actions. I came to understand that, with the best intentions, but without full understanding at the time, I have given away seven members of my family. I know very little of them and may never know more. I am firmly resolved however of the importance of two things. Firstly it is imperative that I make

myself available to my unknown offspring – to whatever degree they wish and to be available for contact when and if they chose to connect with me. Second, I am committed to working for changes which will go some way to rectifying past mistakes – in particular working for changes to legislation and practice which will enable donor conceived people born from sperm donations prior to 1988 to have proper access to knowledge of their biological heritage. That latter is a fundamental human right.

Where it all began – altruism: “I can help”

I became a sperm donor in 1987, at the Prince Henry’s Hospital, in response to a media call from Dr. Gab Kovacs for more donors. I was then in my early 30’s and I saw no prospect of marriage and children at the time. I was acting from altruistic intentions. I was aware of issues of infertility because I had a close friend who was in that circumstance. I wanted to help people who wished to have children but could not do so. I saw that I could help and I felt good about doing so.

I gave a blood sample and details of my hair and eyes colour, ancestry, height and weight, level of education and occupation, and some very brief information about personal interests. I signed a consent form – which, interestingly when viewed in retrospect, made no mention of anonymity nor did it place restrictions on contact between me and any offspring. I was given a sterile jar and sent off to produce a semen sample. It seemed very simple then. Only later was I to realize that it was, and is not, simple.

Done and slipping from mind.

After completing perhaps 10 donations I ceased attending the clinic and the experience slowly slipped from my mind. Partly this was because anonymity and discretion was emphasized by the clinic, and partly because, as observed by another former donor, there was a sense that perhaps the sperm donations would not actually be used to create children – maybe just used for research? For whatever reason, it largely went from my mind and I heard nothing more from the clinic – until twelve years later.

Brought back to mind – news of seven offspring!

In 1999 I received a registered letter, redirected from a long gone residence, from the clinic. The letter informed me, in a matter-of-fact way, that my frozen semen would be “only made available to couples wishing to complete their families”. This was a bombshell. I knew that there were children born from my sperm donations – children as much a half of me as are the two children of my marriage and who live with me. I am the biological father of nine children, seven of whom I have never met, and may never meet.

Reflection – a family given away. What can I do?

The news of my seven unknown offspring set me on a path of long and deep consideration. At times I felt, and still feel, quite anguished that I have seven other children somewhere in the world who carry a part of me and my genetic and family background, but over whose lives I have no direct influence at all. I wonder if they are alive, if they are healthy, happy, well cared for and loved. I hope that they are but all I can do is hope. One day I may meet some of them – maybe all. Who knows? Or maybe I will meet none and will forever wonder about them. It seems to me that the process of being a sperm donor is somewhat akin to giving a child up for adoption with all of these wonderings and anxieties left with the birth parent. Just like birth parents whose children have been adopted I have given away seven of my children. Given

away with good intentions – and without fully realising the impact of my actions – but given away nonetheless. That thinking can take me to very dark places – but it is the reality that I must accept.

Action – joining the voluntary register

Awareness of my seven donor offspring coincided with activity to publicise the importance of donor conceived children knowing their biological heritage. In my reflection one thing became very clear for me. That was that the interests and well-being of the children – all of them – are paramount. Regardless of what the legal framework was at the time of my being a sperm donor, I believe that I do have responsibilities to the children born as a result of my sperm donations. At the least, those people have a right to know what my part of their genetic heritage is – more if they want more. So I joined the Voluntary Registry, lodging an open letter to be given to any children who made contact. That letter is a heartfelt expression of my motivations as a donor and my thoughts about my unmet and unknown offspring. I tell them that that I think about them often and wonder who and how they are, and what is happening in their lives. The letter also tells of a “jigsaw” experience in my life when, at the age of 27, I met for the first time my maternal grandfather – at once seeing so many familiar elements of appearance and character. In conclusion the letter invites and welcomes contact - whenever and however they wish it to be.

I have experienced at least the first steps of such contact. The youngest of the people conceived as a result of my sperm donations made contact through the Register. We shared our first names with each other, she has been given the open letter that I wrote, and at her request I provided some genetic, medical, and ancestry information about me and my family. I wait now to see if and when she wants to take this contact any further. I hope that may happen and that we can learn something of each other. However, even if that does not happen I take solace in the fact that at least one of my unknown children does have my letter to them – and thus she knows that I do think of her and I wish for her a healthy and happy life.

Reflection – impact on my family

In all of this complicated matter there has also been the question of how and when I would tell my children - the ones who live with me - about their other half siblings. In the end it was quite simple, and they have taken on quite equably – and with a degree of curiosity - the fact that that they have half siblings who they may or may not ever meet. Interestingly when I first discussed this with my daughter - who was 15 at that time - she had been doing a school project on adoption. In that project she considered the notion of contacting a birth parent – she taking on the role of the adopted child. This allowed an easy analogy to be made in our discussion about people who are genetically my children, and her half siblings, but of whom we know very little.

Still and all, by my intentioned actions before they were born I have left the children of my marriage with potential complications which they may have to deal with, but which they had no say in creating. The same applies for my partner who may one day have to deal with others coming into my life who are genetically related to me and our children, but with no biological connection to her at all. I am fortunate that my family deal with this all in a mature and sensible fashion as we wait and watch to see where the story may next go.

Activism for change

At the time of my joining the Registry I met a donor conceived person for the first time. We were both fascinated in our perspectives on the two sides of the donor equation. That person was Narelle Grech - to whom this issue of the Journal is dedicated. I subsequently watched Narelle's quest over following years to find her biological father – whom she knew only as “T5”. I shared too with Narelle and others, activism to bring about change in legislation and practice. And then I saw Narelle's joy at finally finding her “other father” only for that to be followed by the cruel blow of Narelle's death just weeks later.

Inspired by Narelle, and other donor conceived people who I met, I saw that I could make a difference by bringing forward the voice less heard - that of a former sperm donor - into public discourse. I spoke at seminars, gave media interviews and wrote submissions and opinion pieces for publication⁶. Subsequently, I was instrumental in bringing together former sperm donors in the *MADMen* group – which group is possibly a world first. At a personal level I am deeply motivated to bring about change and to right the wrong of imposed donor anonymity. I hope one day to meet my offspring – if they wish to meet me. However, if I do not I will be happy and satisfied if I can know that I have played some part in enabling other donor conceived people to meet their biological parents – their donors.

Sperm donors and birth fathers – commonalities in experiences

Gary Clapton, a birth father himself, brings to light one of the few expressions of the “voice” of the birth father⁷. He speaks of the widespread stereotype of the birth father as the 'invisible man', a 'shadowy figure' to whom many generalisations are applied.

Contrary to those assumptions, Clapton's research found birth fathers to have increasingly 'come out', showing that many are neither disinterested nor uncaring. Clapton uncovered experiences and feelings in birth fathers which have many strong parallels to those of the sperm donors whose experiences are reported above. Three aspects of these experiences are particularly striking in their commonality with the feelings of former sperm donors.

Out of sight out of mind

- *I carried it as a burden over decades... I feel the loss almost every day....:*

⁶ Examples: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/father-figures-20111112-1ncxt.html> and <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/knowning-about-your-biological-origins-is-a-basic-right-20120408-1wj7s.html> and http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lawrefrom/iadcpiad/submissions/DC_P55_-_Ian_Smith.pdf

⁷ Clapton, G.

“Birth Fathers and Adoption: An Academic, Professional and Personal Stock-Take of the Past and Present plus Some Future Challenges”

Papers of the 10th Australian Adoption Conference, *Australian Journal of Adoption*, Vol 6, No 1, 2012 <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/aja/article/viewFile/2559/3004>

“Birth Fathers Lives after Adoption”, *Adoption & Fostering*, 2001, 25: 50, aaf.sagepub.com/content/25/4/50.full.pdf

- *The adoption rubbed me out legally, but not emotionally.*

Worry, anxiety, responsibility – feelings of loss

- *...there is also a certain sense of duty. I'd be frightened about it as well. But I very much want to be available for her.*
- *There's one missing in my family. I wonder what she's like. ... I feel I have abandoned my charge. I regard her as my child. As one that's missing amongst my children.*
- *There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of him...*
- *I'd love to see him. What I did was a wrong thing in one way. ... It goes against the grain. You're giving up somebody you instinctually love, is part of you.*
- *...just to find out she's ok.*

Contact with children – and what next?

Clapton reports that the men in his study who had met their children were mostly enjoying the contact and negotiating tricky areas such as living and dealing with the consequences of being a father but not a 'dad':

- *When I met him, I told him 'Yes I was his father' but I wasn't his dad. His dad is the man who brings him up ... I was his father but I wasn't his dad.*

The parallels and resonances between the experiences and feelings of birth fathers and those of sperm donors are striking – but not surprising. In both cases biological children have been separated from their natural fathers and in both cases the natural fathers have been (wrongly) assumed to be disinterested and not caring for their biological offspring. The evidence here points strongly to that not being the case.

Concluding thoughts.

Legislation is currently before the Victorian Parliament which, if enacted will remove current blocks to donor conceived people born in Victoria from sperm or egg donations made prior to 1988 identifying their biological parents. "Narelle's Law", named after the woman who strove to find her biological father for a decade and a half, only to find him when on the threshold of her death, will, if enacted remove a very profound injustice.

The views of sperm donors recorded here, while a small sample, begin to fill a space in which there has been both a paucity of information and many assumptions made about donor's opinions. Far from being a fearful of the removal of anonymity the past sperm donors whose views are reported here will welcome and embrace such change.
