What Do We Tell the Children?

Ellen Waldman, J.D. LLM
Thomas Jefferson School of Law
• Donor Insemination – social mother is biological mother; social father diverges from biological father
Voices in the Debate

• “I would scour faces in the street, in the supermarket, and at school, desperately searching for similarities in others- older men could be my father, people my age my half sibling. I lived in a surreal world wondering if one of the men passing or teaching me was my genetic father. All I wanted was some information…..

• “How It Feels to be a Child of DI ” Anonymous, British Medical Journal 324 (2002)
Voices In the Debate

• “We have had a lot to do with sperm banks in Liverpool and London and the service has practically dried up….We have never had any problem buying what we need before, but last month, when we rang up they said the supplies were limited.”

• Lorraine Goacher, staff nurse at the Cardiff Assisted Reproduction Unit, Wales, 2004
Adoption Precedents

• Research shows:
  • birthmothers highly satisfied with open adoption;
  • curiosity about/desire to meet birthparents did not negate adolescents’ positive views of adoptive family;
  • level of openness not related to child’s behavioral adjustment;

• Adoptive parents in fully disclosed adoptions report more empathy toward birthparent and child, stronger sense of permanence in the relationship with the child

• Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, Frave longitudinal study
Mechanisms for Identity – Release in Adoption

- Mutual Consent registry available in approximately 33 states
- If no consent on file, must make showing of good cause
- Adopted child may also request original birth certificate
- Again, some states require showing of good cause, others will disclose upon request. (Alabama, Alaska, Kansas, New Hampshire, Maine?)
Openness in International Adoption

- In many countries, adoption legislation accords adopted children the right to obtain identifying information from their original birth certificate
  - Western Europe
  - Scotland - 1930
  - Israel - 1960
  - England, Wales – 1976
  - New Zealand - 1985
  - Northern Ireland - 1987
Ireland- access to identifying information available if:

- Disclosure is in child’s best interests
- What if birth mother objects?
- Court held right to genetic information existed but was not absolute
- Developed balancing test incorporating birth mother’s interests, adoptee’s reason for disclosure, views of adoptive parents
Relevance for ART Debate-

• Concern regarding child’s “genetic bewilderment”
• Concern regarding possible damage to bonds in social family
• Protection from unwanted intrusion by biological parent
• Privacy interest of birth parent / donor
Differences Between Adopted Child and Child of DI

- Adoptees lack genetic connection with both social parents. Child of DI has biological relationship with social mother.
- Adoptee may feel sense of abandonment due to birth parent’s waiver of parental rights. Child of DI likely to see donor as “altruistic helper” who donated sperm to facilitate social parent’s strong desire for child.
Data (as opposed to anecdote) on DI offspring experience

- Turner and Coyle-2000-
- 16 participants, ages 26-55, recruited through donor insemination support networks in UK, USA, Canada and Australia
- Answers to semi-structured questionnaire sent over e-mail and interpreted by researchers
- Findings- negative result of secrecy, desire to know about genetic origins, compulsion to search, unhappiness that search is so difficult
Quantitative Data- Donor Offspring

• Golombok- European Study of Assisted Reproduction Families (1996); (2001)
• Phase One- Children between ages 4-8
• Assisted reproduction children did not differ from naturally conceived or adopted children with respect to the presence of psychological disorder/ perception of relationship with their parents.
Quantitative Data-Donor Offspring

• Golombok (2001)- Phase Two- original families contacted when child is 11-12

• On child’s functioning- no differences between children from different family types in relation to interest/effort in school, confidence in school performance, no difference in time spent with peers; similar levels of verbal aggression among all types; ART children less likely to engage in physical aggression with peers than naturally conceived children.
How were kids doing regarding “genetic bewilderment”

• Only 8% of parents had told their child that he or she had been conceived by DI
• Comparisons done between children told and children not told
• No differences relating to parental warmth, child functioning; some differences regarding discipline/control, Children who had been told about DI had less frequent and less severe disputes with their mothers, perceived their mothers as less strict, than those who had not been told.
If Open is Better - How Do We Get There?

• Parents must tell children about the circumstances of their birth.

• Sufficient information must be available to quiet child’s “genetic bewilderment” and quell whatever identity question arise in the wake of disclosure.
DI Parents Adopt a Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Strategy

- 12 studies of parents’ disclosure of DI between 1980-1995 reveal few parents (1-20%) intended to tell offspring.
- In Sweden, where donation is non-anonymous, only 52% of parents had told or intended to tell child.
- In UK, couples with 4-8 yr. old offspring, 39% inclined to openness, 61% were not.
If Parents Tell, What Info Should Be Available?

• Non-identifying Social, Medical Information

• Identifying Information
What Will Abolishing Anonymity Do To Donor Supply?

• Tale of Two Cities- one dark, the other more hopeful

• Sweden- numbers plummeted, than rose in different demographic

• Britain- numbers down and staying down
Perhaps, Altruistically Motivated Donors Will Continue Even If Identification Required

• In recent study conducted in England of donors who had given sperm between 1988 and 2002. Donors at time of donation had been queried regarding attitudes toward identification. In 2004, Donors contacted and asked whether they still felt the same about anonymous versus non-anonymous donation.
Attitudes Toward Information Sharing

• Initially- 38.5% said would still donate absent anonymity; 16% pleased to have assurance of anonymity; 44% unsure
• When questioned in 2004- 56% said they felt the same; 37% said they felt differently
• Of that 37% (12 donors)- 8 (or 25% of total) said they now were willing to be identified and 4 (or 12.5% of total) wanted to remain anonymous
What Role for the Legal System?

- Adopt regime of mandatory anonymity
- Adopt regime of mandatory disclosure
Who’s Your Daddy?

- Cary Grant

Jerry Garcia
2000 Earnings: $5 million
Date Of Death: Aug. 9, 1995
Age: 53
Cause: Heart attack
Survived By: Third wife Deborah Keons Garcia; four daughters