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Frozen Assets

America is the largest exporter of sperm. But what happens when all those kids grow up and decide to go looking for Daddy?

By Jay Newton-Small

For Shari Ann, good Canadian sperm was hard to find. As a single woman in her late 30s, she wanted to get pregnant and knew she didn't have much time. When she began to hunt for the perfect donor, however, she was frustrated by the selection. In her hometown of Quebec City, she found only a few Jewish candidates—a must for Shari Ann (who asked to go by her first name to protect her family's privacy)—and none of them were suitable. So she called a clinic in Toronto that contacted a sperm bank in Virginia, and there she found her genetic Prince Charming: tall, athletic, smart, handsome and Jewish. She bought five vials of his sperm; her twin boys are now 7 years old.

Prince Charming's real name is Ben Seisler, though Shari Ann might have never known that, since U.S. donors can choose to be anonymous. But one day in 2005, Seisler grew curious about the results of his biological generosity—and well he might have been, because he'd been generous indeed. He plugged his donor number into the Donor Sibling Registry and was put in touch with not only Shari Ann's family but also at least 20 others. Overall, he counts more than 70 offspring in the U.S. and abroad, and given the number of donations he made over the course of three years when he was in his early 20s, he calculates there could be as many as 140.

Now 34 and married, Seisler broke the news of the scope of his procreation to his then fiancée Lauren on a 2011 Style channel documentary about sperm donors. Lauren—no surprise—was livid. And Ben—no -surprise—struggled to explain his motivations: “I guess I was dumb. Maybe I'm being dumb now [by giving up anonymity and meeting some of the kids]. I don't know.”

Seisler might have picked a better way to fess up to his future wife, but in any case, a lot of American men will sooner or later be making similar disclosures of their own. Sperm is what financial analysts call a growth sector in the

American economy—and it's one of the few in which the U.S. is running a significant trade surplus. From just a handful of vials 10 years ago, American sperm exports have grown into a multi-million-dollar business. The largest sperm bank in the world, California Cryobank, recorded \$23 million in sales last year, and the U.S. industry overall does an estimated \$100 million in business annually. As of late 2005, ABC News reported that the top four U.S. sperm banks controlled 65% of the global market. The U.S. currently exports sperm to at least 60 countries, including Venezuela, Kenya and Thailand. California Cryobank focuses mostly on the domestic market; only 5% of its business is overseas. But Fairfax Cryobank, the second largest U.S. facility—and the place Shari Ann found Seisler's sperm—says 10% of its sales are exports, and the third largest, Xytex Cryo International, does more than a third of its business abroad. Thus far, sperm banking is a microcosm of a fertility industry that in the U.S. alone has expanded from \$979 million in 1988 to a projected \$4.3 billion in 2013, according to a Marketdata Enterprises study. But sperm—simple, inexpensive and easily exportable—is the iPod of the product line.

America's ejaculatory exceptionalism is not a result of American men's superior virility. Rather, quality control and wide product selection are the keys. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration requires testing for most sexually transmitted diseases, and with HIV, that means 180 days and multiple tests. Sperm banks study a donor's family medical history going back three generations. California Cryobank boasts that it's easier to get into Harvard than to become one of its sperm donors. Also, America has a very diverse population. So if you're a couple in a country like Japan, where third-party insemination is generally frowned on, finding a match in the U.S. is easy.

What's more, even as Seisler and other men reveal their identities to their very extended families, the U.S. still almost always makes anonymity an option—and that's driving overseas customers into American arms. In 2004, after the U.K. passed a law forbidding anonymity, the number of sperm donors plummeted far below what was needed to meet domestic demand. Similar changes in Canada's and Australia's privacy laws literally dried up local donations. Both countries now import more than 90% of their donated sperm. And for overseas shoppers who want to know the identity of the donor, there are plenty of American men like Seisler who happily come forward.

"People use American sperm because you can often know the donor and the regulations are strict," says Dr. Zeev Shoham, an Israeli fertility professor who runs a website, IVF-Worldwide.com, that tracks 3,300 in vitro fertilization clinics worldwide.

But the sperm boom gives rise to a lot of complicated legal and medical questions. Could a remote biological heir seek a paternity declaration against a donor father and later make claims against Dad's estate? When a donor settles down and finally has kids he wants to raise, will those children want to meet their scattered tribe of half siblings? What recourse does a family abroad have if they're not happy with the product—say, if the child was born with a genetic illness? Every young industry has its growing pains, but in the sperm game, those problems can be for life.

An Expanding Market

One thing that makes sperm such a profitable commodity is that the customer base is huge. The World Health Organization estimated in 2006 that there were 60 million to 80 million infertile couples worldwide. Thus far, most international sperm business has been for heterosexual couples with fertility challenges, but that is changing as more cultures accept lesbians and single parents—two groups that compose by some estimates up to 60% of the U.S. market. When Shari Ann started looking, she couldn't find a clinic that accepted single mothers; now there are dozens in Canada.

While anonymity helps the U.S. tap this market effectively, it's the quality issue that really keeps overseas buyers flocking—with top-shelf product going for top-end prices. Dads are profiled according to height, appearance and education level. A man with a Ph.D. can make as much as \$500 per ejaculation. Lower-end donors, who still need at least a college degree and a minimum height of 5 ft. 9 in., can earn about \$60 a pop. Depending on how dense his sperm is and the mobility of his swimmers—critical to surviving the freezing process—a donor can make up to \$60,000 over two years, the maximum amount of time most clinics use a donor.

The Internet has made sperm shopping easier. A woman who logs into the Fairfax site can plug in a picture of her husband—or of Brad Pitt, for that matter—and facial-recognition software will look for the closest possible donor match. Customers can view donors' college transcripts, family medical histories and even photos of existing children and video interviews with the men themselves.

“Prospective parents know more about these donors than I do about my husband’s family medical history, and we’ve been married more than 30 years,” says Trina Leonard, a spokeswoman for Fairfax. All customers have to do is pick and pay, and a few days later, a canister of sperm frozen in liquid nitrogen arrives at their doctor’s office.

Taming the Frontier

Sophisticated as all this seems, we are still in the Wild West phase of global sperm sales. Lucrative pay has raised questions about sperm profiteering. Seisler donated to two clinics—one in Boston and one in Virginia—to help pay his way through college and law school. One man in Britain who donated for over 30 years has sired more than 1,000 children. Such stories prompted Britain to restrict the number of children a donor can spawn, including his own, to 10. The FDA has no limits on the number of offspring a donor may have, but most banks say they limit men to 25 or 30 children. That said, there’s evidence that those guidelines can be loose—just look at how many children Seisler has—and banks have no way of knowing if a donor has visited several facilities. And there’s nothing to stop individuals from starting their own endeavors. A 36-year-old California computer programmer has been in the news of late for fathering 15 children by giving out his fresh sperm for free—often inserted with a turkey baster. He claims to be a virgin.

More worrisome, donors could be unwittingly spreading genetic diseases. One Texas couple is suing a sperm bank in New England after their child turned out to have cystic fibrosis, a disease for which banks aren’t yet required by federal law to screen. The risk of an ethnicity mix-up for overseas buyers is not just theoretical—it’s -happened—and so far, parents have little legal recourse. Finally, when a prodigious donor like Seisler produces lots of half siblings who grow up near one another, accidental incest could result. Shari Ann knows of two other children Seisler sired in Quebec and has been careful to track them.

While it would be hard for foreign offspring to claim U.S. citizenship—unless their genetic fathers helped them, as many U.S. servicemen did for children they sired during the Vietnam War—it’s not outside the realm of possibility that sperm-donor fathers might be forced to take responsibility for them. There have been two cases in the U.S. in which sperm donors who forged relationships with the children they fathered were found liable by courts for child support. A court could make the same determination for children abroad.

“Someone could show up—say, a 16-year-old whose parents died in France,” says Arthur Caplan, a bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania. “He may know his sperm father and say, ‘I think you should support me.’ American courts decide [such] issues to the child’s best interest. They’re not interested in promises from sperm banks. It may not make the child a citizen, but it sure makes the donor a dad.”

For many sperm donors, like Seisler, the temptation to see what youthful folly might have produced can be powerful. In the Style channel TV show, Seisler explained what motivated him to reach out to his genetic offspring. “I want to be available to these families to be a resource for them,” he said. “I’m curious as to what these kids are like. But I’m not looking for anything from them.” When a friend replied that Seisler can’t be hitting 70 Chuck E. Cheese birthday parties a year, he bristled. “They’re not my kids,” he replied. “I don’t see them as my kids.”

While that may be the boundary he wants to set, once the kids know who he is, it’s up to them whether to honor it. He’s been keeping in touch with dozens of families via e-mail—including Shari Ann’s—but now that he and his wife are considering having kids of their own, he’s keeping a low profile. He has stopped talking publicly and refused to comment for this article.

Until the industry is regulated—and it may never be—it will remain a market that pushes boundaries. Some groups, like the Donor Sibling Registry, which has connected more than 9,000 biological fathers and siblings from 31 countries, are pushing to do away with anonymity, a move resisted by U.S. sperm banks, which fear the same kind of falloff in donors that other countries experienced. The banks instead favor an anonymous registry that could be used to ensure donors aren’t doubling or tripling their money. In any case, genetic mapping makes things more transparent than they used to be no matter what the anonymity rules are, and the timeless question—“Who’s your daddy?”—is easier to answer than ever. What donor children and their biological dads choose to do with that information is helping redefine the concept of modern family and the global village.