

Donor-conception: 'I'd got to the bottom of a secret'

People conceived with donated sperm usually find out only in adulthood. And many never discover the truth at all



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Christine Whipp at home. Photograph: Mark Passmore/Apex for the Guardian

All through her childhood, Christine Whipp knew there was a big family secret. "Nobody said there was – I just had this sense. There was a tension that just couldn't be explained and it seemed to focus on me. One of my earliest memories was wondering if I really was the person I was told I was."

When her mother confirmed that there was something Whipp didn't know about her past, she waited expectantly for the details. "But she still wouldn't tell me, and eventually our relationship became so strained that we became estranged. By 41, I couldn't bear it any more and wrote to her pleading to tell me once and for all. She wrote back and said I was donor conceived," says Whipp, 56.

Talk to anyone who knows they are donor conceived and there's a good chance they only found out in adulthood. It is estimated that most don't know at all – they are simply never told. "The further back in time you go, the more likely it was to have been kept under wraps, but it can still happen today," says Christine Gunter, co-ordinator of [UK Donor Link](#).

In those days, clinics advised parents not to tell anyone – sometimes not even their GP and certainly not their offspring. There was often a sense of shame about a woman using another man's sperm, says Gunter. "I think many parents were also in a state of denial about this being another man's child. Those attitudes started to change and, eventually, there were legislative changes that mean anyone born after 1991 can be provided with non-identifying information about their sperm donor and anyone born after 2005 can get identifying information. But it's left entirely up to the parents to decide whether to tell their children they are donor conceived. There's not even any clue on the birth

certificate, which states the social father as father."

Finding out in adulthood that you are one of the estimated 1,000-2,000 children born every year after donor insemination can have a profound effect, says Gunter. "You are given this information that changes your very sense of who you are, and you often find that everyone in the family has known about it except you. Also like people who find out in adulthood that they're adopted, it's common that it comes out when one parent gets ill or dies – the worst possible time."

But whereas the 1975 law that recognised adopted people's right to know their roots was retrospective – allowing all adopted adults information about their parents' identities – the 2005 legislation relating to donor conception only gives such rights to people born after that time. "That means it will be 2023 before any donor-conceived person in the UK has the identity of their donor," says Gunter. "Yet we know that many past donors are happy to provide information and some want to meet their offspring."

Whipp says her first emotion on reading her mother's letter was relief. "I had finally got to the bottom of this enormous secret and everything suddenly made sense. But then I felt angry. I should have grown up knowing this key information about me and where I come from. At the age of six, I was left to grieve a man I believed to be my father, when actually my father was alive and living 80 miles away. And I grew up thinking that the reason my mother couldn't seem to bond with me must be that I was worthless."

Whipp became determined to find her biological father, despite the obstacles. "It didn't matter how minimal his existence was in my life. He is still half of me, so I found out which clinic I was conceived in and got a book about it. I then worked out the kinds of people the clinic might have used as donors in the 1950s. There were strong links with particular university departments, and I discovered that lecturers, rather than medical students, were used. I made a shortlist of a dozen men and made contact with them. One came to my house, but he'd donated 10 years later. Others didn't answer or had died. I found the sons of one of the men who had died and asked them to be tested to see if they were related to me."

Both refused. "They didn't understand my plight, but when the older brother turned 70, I felt time was running out and I wrote again, saying it would put my mind at rest just to be able to eliminate their father from my list. They agreed and, just after my 50th birthday, a letter arrived from the lab confirming that we were half-siblings. I'm a different person because of it. I've read my father's autobiography ... and discovered huge similarities. I'm happier and calmer for knowing about him and ultimately who I am."

Emma Cresswell, 23, agrees that her childhood would have been very different if she had known the truth. "I was 19 when I found out. The man I thought was my father told me during a row. I was shellshocked. I'm a triplet, and my brothers felt the same. If I had known earlier, I would have understood all sorts of things about our family, including why he didn't bother with us after he split up with my mum ... To suddenly find out in adulthood was to be told I'd been living a lie."

Cresswell's search for her biological father is ongoing, but she remains determined. "I need to know the reason he did it and whether he feels any moral responsibility. I'd like to know what he looks like, how old he is, what country he comes from ... there's a half of me that I know nothing about."

Julia Feast, policy research consultant at the [British Association for Adoption & Fostering](#), believes this is reason enough for people to be told they are donor conceived from the start. "In 2001, there was a case of a nine-year-old donor-conceived child who

was found to have a potentially fatal condition known as Opitz syndrome. His genetic father had carried this inherited single gene disorder. This sperm donor had fathered 43 babies from a London clinic, each with a 50-50 chance of inheriting this rare disease."

Others grow up believing their social father's medical history is their own. "My father – the man I thought was my father – has a medical condition," says Rachel Newman, 28. "When he became ill, the doctor told me it's a genetic disease that I have a one in two chance of getting. I was very worried, but my parents were strangely dismissive. One day I asked my mum if my dad really was my dad. She said that of course he was and changed the subject."

It was only when Newman had a routine pregnancy blood test at the age of 25 that she noticed her blood group was AB. "I was sure my dad's blood group was O and could remember from biology lessons that it meant he couldn't be related to me. I approached my mum again, and she couldn't deny it ... I do feel cross about those lies."

Some men are estimated to have fathered hundreds of children. Given that research shows we are often attracted to people with familiar looks and the fact that couples tended to use clinics near where they lived, there are concerns that these people could inadvertently enter into relationships with one another – which could be prevented if they knew they were donor conceived.

Barry Stevens, 59, believes his father had around 1,000 children. "He and his wife ran a well-known clinic, and there is evidence to suggest that around two-thirds of the children born to couples using this clinic were his."

He describes being told he was donor conceived at the age of 18 as "one of those moments where the world gets very quiet". "It certainly helped explain things like my father's remoteness ... this large, empty space opened up in my life and I became determined to fill it by finding out about my biological father. Now that I have found out who he was, there is no doubt I do identify with him. It hasn't weakened my sense of family – the one that I was brought up in, I mean. In fact, I believe that knowing what I do now while I was growing up might have made my relationship with my social father, now dead, closer. Any big secret sits in the middle of a family like a landmine – you have to watch what you say because any bit of conversation might lead to that secret. That is certainly the way we lived."

Like many donor-conceived adults, Stevens has benefited from meeting his half-siblings – others born from the same donor. "I consider them to be part of my family and I think the feeling is mutual," he says.

David Gollancz, one of his half-brothers, agrees. "There are 12 of us who are known to each other. Two never got involved, but the rest of us see one another with varying degrees of frequency and gather en masse roughly once a year. Just as with ordinary families there is room for a wide range of feelings and qualities of relationship – I am very close to some and less so to others ... There is an undeniable sense of the familiar about them, and I certainly think I would have clicked with my biological father. I feel that I am like him in ways which I don't feel about the Gollanczes."

Gollancz and a growing number of donor-conceived people are working with Julia Feast to change the birth registration system. "If parents know it's there in black and white for their children to see when they're older, they are far more likely to tell," says Feast. "All of us have a short birth certificate that can be used for many situations, including applying for a job. We propose that the longer birth certificate indicates third-party involvement, without giving identifying details. This is exactly the same system as in adoption, and it works very well. My view is that we should also be providing

professional support ... just as we do with adopted people who decide they need help or to look for their roots. UK Donor Link is currently the only organisation doing this, and even they can only help people born prior to 1991, and future funding is uncertain."

Olivia Montuschi, founder of the [Donor Conception Network](#), disagrees that birth certificates should be changed. "It would be disproportionately intrusive into people's lives. Far better to encourage parents to tell through raising awareness and educating parents. We run workshops showing parents how to talk about it ... I'd say the pendulum is already swinging towards much more towards telling."

Marilyn Crawshaw, honorary fellow at the University of York, points out that we don't know how many children are told today. "But we do know from research that finding out only in adulthood is a feature of those who seek help, and that it can be very traumatic."

She believes we have much to learn from Australia and New Zealand. "In these countries, the questions asked at policy and practice level include: Is this going to be emotionally healthy for the family? Are we thinking about how the children will feel when they are grown up? Some clinics are willing to arrange meetings between the parent and donor even before the treatment has taken place and then, if the child wants to know more about the donor as they are growing up, there's an opportunity to meet up again. In the UK, I certainly don't know of any clinics that would consider facilitating contact. The treatment takes place, then you're off and on your own, and the rest is up to you."

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