

# Knowing about your biological origins is a basic right

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OPINION

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## Victoria can be a world leader with information on donor conception.

CLEM Newton-Brown (*The Age*, March 29) has it right when he says of donor conception as practised in the 1980s that this was an experiment that we got wrong and which we now need to correct.

Like Peter Lewis, (*The Age*, March 30), I was part of that "experiment". I was a sperm donor in the mid-'80s. I was motivated by altruism. I saw that I could help others and I felt good about doing so. It seemed simple then. Now I realise it is not simple at all.

I know I am the biological father of nine children. Two of my offspring live with me. Seven - offspring from my sperm donations - I have never met. I'm married now, I have children and I can see before me the whole process of the development of a person who is the sum of so many genetic and familial influences.

At times I feel quite anguished that I have seven other children who carry a part of me and my genetic and family background but over whose lives I have no direct influence.

I wonder if they are alive, if they are healthy, happy, well cared for and loved. All I can do is hope. One day I may meet some of them. Who knows? Or maybe I will meet none and will forever wonder about them.

The thing that I have done is make myself available to meet those people if they wish. I have joined the voluntary donor register and am available - for exchange of medical and family history information, meetings, or whatever. It is up to the children of my donations to do what they wish.

Of course, it will be complicated and challenging for me and my family. But I believe I have a fundamental responsibility to those people to let them see and know something of their genetic and biological heritage. I see this as an issue of fundamental human rights - the rights of donor-conceived people to know of their origins if they wish. To my mind that human right outweighs the promises of anonymity that I and other sperm donors received in the 1980s.

The doctors who gave those promises were well intentioned, but I believe they were wrong to deny donor-conceived people access to knowledge of their genetic heritage.

The parallels with adoption practice are strong. For years adopted people were similarly denied access to knowledge of their birth parents. That was changed by legislation - with safeguards and support mechanisms built in as is the case with the recommended changes to information about sperm donors. The sky did not fall in with those changes and it will not in this case either - if handled carefully and sensitively.

Some sperm donors wish to retain anonymity. They may be frightened of disruption to their families or be worried that the children conceived through their donations will make financial claims on them and their families. The latter is a misapprehension - as the law is clear that this cannot occur. Disruption and unsettlement from the appearance of their donor offspring - maybe so. But weighing that against the rights of the offspring to have knowledge of their biological parentage - as the Victorian parliamentary inquiry has done - must lead to a judgment that human rights are paramount in this case.

The inquiry has recognised these significant complexities and has made strong recommendations for safeguards and support for both donors and the offspring. Specifically, the inquiry recognised the importance of ensuring that there will be no unreasonable interference in donors' lives and recommended that donors and donor-conceived people have the ability to place a veto on contact.

There are also clear recommendations for effective counselling and support services for all who are affected. It will be crucial that these services are properly provided to help people work through the potentially complex circumstances of offspring making contact with their biological parents.

This issue is about people: the donors who have created lives, and the people who have been born from the donations of sperm and eggs. As one of the people involved in the donor conception "experiment" of the 1980s, I support changes to legislation and practice that will enable donor-conceived people to gain the rights of access to information about their biological parents and their genetic and familial heritage. The recommendations of the parliamentary inquiry have set out a way in which that can be achieved while best treating the rights of all parties concerned.

Victoria can be a world leader in taking a compassionate, progressive and rights-based approach to the issue of granting donor-conceived people access to information about their heritage. I hope that Parliament will do just that when it considers how to respond and act on this report.

**Ian Smith is a former sperm donor who gave evidence to the parliamentary inquiry into access by donor-conceived people to information about donors.**

