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AlterNet / By Anneli Rufus

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One Man Fathering 150 Children? Why Sperm Banks May Be Unethical

Super-spawn stories are becoming common because sperm banks behave like corporations.

October 11, 2011 | To offset law-school expenses, Ben Seisler spent three years donating sperm to a Virginia sperm bank. He recently learned that his donations have produced 74 children -- so far.



Photo Credit: AFP

On the reality show *Style Exposed: Sperm Donor*, set to air Thursday, Oct. 13, we learn that while Seisler donated anonymously, he later discovered the [Donor Sibling Registry](#), a website created to help donor-children find their biological fathers and half-siblings. After

posting his contact information and "donor number" at the DSR, he began receiving emails from mothers who had bought and used his sperm.

"I want to be available to these families," Seisler, now a Boston lawyer, says on the reality show. "I'm kind of curious as to what are these kids like."

When a friend asks whether he plans to attend 74 birthday parties every year, Seisler demurs. "They're not my kids," he says.

Aren't they?

The *New York Times* reported recently on a man whose donated sperm has produced 150 children, along with other donors who, thanks to data revealed by the DSR and similar sites, have "fathered" 50 or more.

Super-spawn stories are becoming common because sperm banks behave like corporations, says Rene Almeling, an assistant professor of sociology at Yale and the author of

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Sex Cells: The Medical Market for Eggs and Sperm (University of California, 2011).

"In this country, we have moved from very small-scale custom production of sperm to mass-manufacturing. The national supply of sperm is concentrated in a small number of large, for-profit companies," Almeling says.

This is a recent development. For most of the 20th century, sperm donation was a boutique, on-demand affair. Typically, when a couple told their private doctor that they'd been unable to conceive, "the doctor would go out and yank a med student or medical resident off the rotation." In exchange for a small fee, "that student would provide a sample which would be immediately transferred into the patient in the next room," Almeling says.

The 1970s saw the first commercial sperm banks using frozen sperm. These boomed during the AIDS epidemic, when frozen sperm that had been tested comprehensively for diseases seemed safer to a frightened public -- and government agencies -- than fresh effluent.

This launched what Almeling calls "the mass manufacturing of sperm," along with catalogs "that you can flip through online to select your donor based on race, hair color and SAT score."

To maximize profits, sperm banks recruit desirable donors with high sperm counts. Almeling interviewed sperm-bank administrators who admitted that they routinely exclude candidates they consider "ugly."

"Only a very small percentage of men are accepted as sperm donors. Sperm banks invest a lot of money in finding donors," which entails medical screenings. To offset costs, "they usually ask each donor to donate once a week for a year. That's how you end up with one donor producing hundreds of samples. That's how you get these large caches of genetic material being shipped all over."

In those boutique-donor days, secrecy and anonymity were paramount. In this new era of openness, more parents tell kids they were donor-conceived. And more kids grow up wanting to meet their donors.

"It's a way of learning more about themselves," says Alice Ruby, executive director of the *Sperm Bank of California* (TSBC), a Berkeley nonprofit whose voluntary Identity-Release Program, patented in 1983 and allowing donor-conceived adults to contact their donors, was the first of its kind worldwide.

"When people are struggling to conceive, often all they're thinking about is bringing this cute baby into the world. We want to help people conceive, but we're taking a long-term approach that they might not have the time or ability to take. We're thinking: Once that cute baby grows up, what if he or she wants to know more?"

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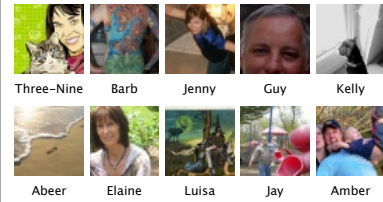
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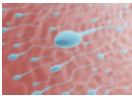
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