

DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH

8 June 2022

Adjournment - Donor-Conceived People – Gail

Start

Thank you, Madame Speaker.

This is my next story in my series about donor-conceived people, but this story is a little bit different. This story is from Gail – a recipient parent who utilised donor sperm to start a family. This is Gail’s story, and these are her words:

My 11-year-old daughter Lola has 103 siblings, and they are just the ones we know about.

When I found myself in my early 40s and suddenly single, I decided I would use a sperm donor to start my family. I decided to go ahead with a reputable fertility clinic in Canberra. This, I thought, was the responsible way to do things.

In 2010, I underwent IVF at a Canberra fertility clinic and began a process of compulsory counselling. I recognised later that this was a completely parent-centric process—how would I cope if I didn’t get pregnant? Did I have support processes in place? There was not a single mention of the child; not one suggestion about the unique needs of donor-conceived people.

One failed cycle, one miscarriage and one successful cycle later, I birthed my beautiful daughter. The clinic advised me at the time that the U.S. sperm donor I chose could be used a maximum of 5 times.

When Lola was a toddler, I decided to investigate whether she had any siblings. I called the fertility clinic, and they were able to tell me the age and sex of a handful of siblings in Canberra, but there was no possibility of connecting with them. After conducting some research, I discovered an international website where interested families who had used the same donor could reach out after paying an annual fee.

At first glance, it appeared there was only one family that matched with Lola, however before too long, other families started appearing. Multiple siblings popped up in Canada, even more in the U.S. and several others in Australia.

I decided to do some further sleuthing in an attempt to establish just how many Australian siblings existed. After some assertive verbal exchanges with various fertility clinics in other states of Australia who used the same U.S. sperm bank, I established a rough estimate of 23 Australian siblings. We've since connected to 7 of them, but what of the others? Where do they live? How old are these children? Do the children even know they're donor-conceived? And the most disturbing question of all is when Lola becomes sexually active, how will she know she is not having sex with a sibling?

Recently my family discovered an inherited heart condition on my mother's side. This led me to reflect on whether Lola's biological father, the sperm donor, might discover an inherited condition in his family, and if so, would he

inform the sperm bank? I've since learned that this is cause for significant concern. It appears that U.S. sperm banks are particularly reticent about sharing any such information.

When Lola was 5 years old, I rang the fertility clinic to inform them of my discovery that the sperm bank actually had a worldwide family limit that well and beyond Canberra's family limit of 5. The clinic confirmed that yes, the limit was 20 families. I told them that in fact, this figure was out of date, and informed the clinic that the U.S sperm bank had increased the number to 40 families—the donor coordinator at the clinic didn't even know. She didn't know that the sperm bank with whom the clinic had a service agreement had changed their guidelines.

When Lola was 7 years old, she informed me that she would never use a donor. When she was 8 years old, she told me she would look for her siblings until she dies. That's a significant chunk of adult life I've appropriated. I decided Lola needed some counselling. Given my experience with the fertility clinic's counsellor, I knew just not anyone would understand the nuances of being donor-conceived or have the appropriate skills to speak with a donor-conceived child. It took me a long time to find a specialised counsellor.

The reality is that Lola's sibling count is somewhere closer to 200. We'll never know the truth, and neither will the Australian fertility clinic, or the sperm bank that helped me create her.

It is stories like Gail's that make me incredibly determined to see reform in the ACT and to see the rights of the child front and centre of legislative reform.

Thank you.

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