

## Submission Regarding Donor Conception in Australia



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I am 27 years old and I was conceived using anonymous donor sperm from the now defunct Prince Henry's Hospital in Melbourne, Victoria in the early 1980s. I am currently living and working in London as a social worker.

### This is My Story

There are not enough words in the world to begin to write about what it is like being a person who was conceived via anonymous donor sperm. It has impacted on me more greatly than any other factor in my life. It has been an obvious blessing and it has often felt like a cruel curse.

I found out about my donor conceived (DC) status when I was fifteen years old. Before this time I had no idea that things were so different about my place in my family or the way in which I entered the world. I grew up with a mum, a dad and a beautiful older sister, M, in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne. Mum and dad conceived my sister M naturally. When my parents told us about my conception, this secret about me that they had carried for so many years, it came as the biggest shock of our lives. But it also made a lot of sense to me.

Initially being DC did not mean so much to me, mainly as I really had no idea what it meant. ART practices were still quite a taboo subject. It wasn't until I was a few years older that it all sank in and I started to realise how unjust a position I was in. For those first few years the small, non-identifying pieces of information about my biological father

were enough; this is what the letter read from the professor who helped to conceive me to my initial query about my “donor”:

*"Thank you for your letter. I have identified who the donor was involved with your conception back in 1981. There were three people with a similar name in the telephone book and I have written them each a private and confidential letter asking them to contact me. I will keep you updated if there are any developments.*

*In the meantime I thought you would like to have the non-identifying information that we had on file. As the donor who donated for you was recruited a long time ago, we don't have a great deal of information but here goes.*

*He was a student at the time of donating and was 5 foot 7 inches tall. He had dark brown hair, brown eyes and weighed 10 stone 3 pounds. He was married, had not family history of any disease and his blood group was 0 positive. Unfortunately we don't have any further biological data on him, but at least this will give you a little bit of a picture."*

When I inevitably became more curious and wanted to know more I was met with fierce denial and a lack of compassion from the very professor and the very institution that helped to conceive me. The “donor” was anonymous, and I was told that because my parents and the donor all agreed to this anonymity I would have to just accept this and get on with things.

I cannot begin to describe how dehumanising and powerless I am to know that the name and details about my biological father and my entire paternal family sit somewhere in a filing cabinet in Melbourne, with no means to access it. Information about my own family, my roots, my identity, I am told I have no right to know.

## Activism & Pieces of the Puzzle

When I did start to meet other DC people and realise that I was not alone in my feelings of anger, powerlessness and loss I decided that I wanted to try to affect some change. So around 2003 I started to speak publicly about what it is like being DC, in the hopes of raising public awareness and trying to gain equal rights in accessing records. I was also slightly hopeful that my biological father might recognise my face on the TV, in the newspaper articles I was featuring in. Each time I had my photo taken I felt as though I was preparing to meet him for the first time. How sad this is to reflect upon now.

Meeting others in my situation also gave me hints as to who to ask for information; none of this journey has been easy. Even finding out the smallest pieces of information has made me feel like a detective of sorts. One DC friend advised me about donor codes, which each donor was assigned at the clinic. If you found another DC person with the same donor code you were most likely siblings. I was able to learn that my donor code is T5 and so this became my biological father's name. Many years later I was to learn the

significance of this random combination of a letter and a number. T represents the fact that his surname starts with the letter T and he was the fifth donor in the Prince Henry's program to donate sperm. Even this information made me happy beyond belief. It delighted me to think that my actual initials were N.T! My sister has always commented how sad she feels for me to be so happy with the scraps of information I have been given. It really is a bitter/sweet event in these terms.

Being a DC person was the catalyst for me to enroll into a Social Work degree at RMIT University in 2004. Before this time I had no real passion to study anything in particular, but when I began becoming active in the DC community I realised that one way I could make a difference is to channel all of this passion into a career. To help other people in my situation some day. To support them and assist them in what is surely one of the most complex of situations in terms of identity and family.

Not long into my degree I was able to find out that I have eight half siblings (five sisters and three brothers) as a result of my biological father's donations. We were all born between 1982 and 1985 and all conceived in Melbourne. In 2006 I was able to learn that my biological father's surname is of Maltese origin. This was an amazing discovery for me. It means a lot to me since I grew up with Maltese parents, so knowing my biological father shares the same (or part thereof) nationality as me is special. I was fortunate enough to travel to Malta this year and it really did feel familiar, like going back to my roots and one way to trace my genetic history. I have often wondered what my father looks like back home in Melbourne, and so being right there, in Malta where so many of my ancestors are from made me feel quite content. For the first time I felt as though I was somewhere I truly belonged.

As for my DC siblings I often wonder about them, whether we have met or I have walked past them in the street. Do they know they are DC? Will their parents ever tell them? Will I ever have the chance to meet any of them? Recently, with the wonder of Facebook, I was pointed to a friend of a friend whom they said reminded them of me. To anyone else they might laugh and go along their day. For me it meant looking at this person's profile and analysing everything about them. Looking for physical similarities and comparing interests, ages and so on. I think there might be something in this link, but what am I to do? Do I approach this person and potentially open up a Pandora's box for them? Don't they deserve to know the truth about their own identity if they are DC? And what about me? Shouldn't I be able to know my own siblings?

Not knowing is the hardest part. Not knowing whom my biological father (T5) is, who his family is, my entire paternal family... whether T5 is still even alive! Does he want to know me? Does he think about the donations he made as a student all those years ago? Does he have a family of his own? The questions that whirl around my head are endless.

I believe very strongly that this information about my father and my paternal family should be accessible to me. I do not want money from them or to cause anyone drama. I want what is an intrinsic part of me; answers that will help me to feel that I completely

know myself. I can say without a shadow of a doubt that at the age of 27 I still do not know myself like I should. I still feel that yearning to know whom my father is, just as strongly as I did 12 years ago when I first found out this truth. This feeling will not go away until I know. In time I have moved through so many phases; shock, curiosity, anger, loss, grief, disconnectedness, disempowerment and hopelessness. I can say that whilst the anger has subsided over time the other emotions come in waves, over and over. I have personally been to see many counselors and psychologists regarding my DC status over the years and as recently as this year. Whilst it is a yearning that mostly lingers like dark clouds, it is always present and always heavy in my heart, even when I am at my happiest. I feel as though it will always bring about in me difficulties that will never be resolved or healed, for this curiosity and yearning is like an open wound with no one to be able to offer a bandage. Robinson (2000) echoes this experience from the experience of adopted people, *“There is no finality to their grief, as they know that they have another family somewhere and that they will always, in some way, be a part of that family”* (Robinson, 2000, pp. 106-107).

This is not to say that I don't love my parents, because I do, a lot. I respect them for telling me the truth about my identity and realise they created me in an era when the consequences of such a practice were not fully made available to them. The same can be said for my biological father who probably did not think twice about the short times he spent donating for some extra money. The real dilemma is that no one with authority stopped to properly consider what the thoughts, wishes and needs of the DC person might be. So much could have been learnt from the adoption community and so many adopted people tried to raise their concern, but were disregarded. I did not sign anything stating that I would be happy for my father and paternal family to be kept secret from me. I was not a party to this agreement and I believe that this information should be shared with me.

## A Question of Competing Rights

There is heated debate around whose rights should ultimately prevail. I propose that those DC people who were given no true voice should be given paramount consideration. Millar (2000) argues that, *“Given the knowledge we now have about the negative effects of secrecy in past adoption practices, it is quite extraordinary that the anonymity of pre-legislation ‘donors’ is still being protected, at the expense of their children, and that the ‘rights’ of donors who do not wish to be identified prevail over their children’s need to know about their origins”*(Millar, 2000, pg.22). Agreements made by consenting adults failed to recognise the DC person's inherent right to a true identity, as is now enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights Of the Child (UN CROC). Australia is a signatory to this, yet it has failed to ensure these same rights are upheld for all DC people retrospectively.

The UN CROC states:

*Article 7*

That children have *“as far as possible the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents”, and;*

#### Article 8

The *“right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference”* should be paramount.

The Victorian State Government holds strong values around the well being of children in Victoria. In 2006 the State of Victoria’s Children Report was released. This explored some principle ideals that should be met for all children in the state and indeed the nation. As a part of the stated vision of the State for Victoria’s children is the value that, *“Parents and families are enabled to care effectively for their child and supported to act in his or her best interests”*(pg 7). The well being of children in the state is seen as being met physically and mentally. The well being of any child would firstly center on having a clear picture of who they are, first and foremost. It is then in every person’s interest that they know their true identity.

#### Nature Via Nurture

Having now qualified as a social worker and having worked in foster care and child protection I feel that I have good insight into what it means for children to grow and develop in healthy and positive ways. Children are a mixture of both genetics and the environment in which they grow. Neither should be discounted and I believe are equally as important as each other. Without genes there ceases to exist a human being and without the correct attachments, role models and support children can fail to meet their milestones and grow into well rounded people. I believe that denying any person or child access to their true birth information is akin to neglect, especially when it is done so deliberately. There also needs to be consideration given to the importance of knowing one’s family medical history. I am missing half of mine and have no idea what potential medical markers I may have inherited from my paternal family, which I may too pass onto my own children.

#### What needs to change?

##### Uniform Legislation

I am a strong advocate that the legislation around DC needs to be unified across the country, ensuring equal rights for all involved in this practice. I understand that health is a state matter, however such a complex practice should be undertaken in a standardised way to ensure the best interests of children.

##### True Birth Certificates

Birth certificates should note that a person is DC and reflect the true nature of their conception, identity and family ties. No one should have to question their birth certificate, but especially those whose conceptions are legally and deliberately planned through ART. My birth certificate is not a truthful form of my identity and it was created in a false manor with the assistance of doctors and policy makers.

### A National Register

A national register should be established to assist in linking biological family, also as a means to prevent DC people possibly procreating. This is something I truly worry about, for not only will it directly affect DC people's children, but generations of people to come. The medical and social implications are enormous and yet unknown.

### A Limit on the Number of Families Per Donor

To further prevent the likelihood of siblings procreating with each other (Genetic Sexual Attraction) the number of families one donor can donate to should be limited to one family per donor. To be truly reflective of a child's best interests keeping siblings within the same family would prevent complications such as GSA.

### Payments to Donors

Payment to donors should not be permitted in any instance. If this practice is to continue it is vital that donations are altruistic and that money does not factor into the decision to assist in creating a new life. Not only is it a gross materialisation of the human body, but also it is personally dehumanising to think that my own conception could be linked to such a brute financial transaction. Gametes make babies and cannot be likened to any other commodity or type of donation.

### Retrospective Access to Records - Equal Rights for All DC!

It is my belief that all DC people are afforded equal status with regard to accessing information about their true birth parentage. In 1984 retrospective legislation was introduced in Victoria that allowed all adopted people to access their birth information, regardless of when they were born and whether that was in a closed adoption circumstance. Around Australia legislation regarding DC practices are varied and inconsistent. It is then evident that a DC person may be privileged or discriminated against based upon when and where they were born. The Adoption Act (VIC: 1984) recognised that all adopted people, regardless of their year of birth, should have the opportunity to access information pertaining to their birth and their genetic heritage. Whether or not this is something that people wish to proceed with, it should be their choice.

### Ongoing Support for All DC People & their Families

Counseling and support is a must! I know that one day I will be working with DC people,

supporting them and helping them search for their families. It is already happening. When I first learnt of my DC status there was basically no support and I struggled for years in silence. No DC person, whose conception was done in conjunction with the law, should have to suffer as a result. Much more public awareness and support needs to be established for families and most importantly DC people. It needs to be provided to all DC people equally, regardless of when and where they were born.

## In Conclusion

Often the question is asked of outspoken donor-conceived people, “*Aren’t you grateful to be alive?*” I believe that a large part of society is still not sure how to deal with or understand the losses felt by DC people. Such remarks are hurtful, yet often stated out of a complete lack of education about what it is like to be DC and separated from half or all of your biological family. So many people take their own connections to their biological family for granted. Parents need to be more willing to support their DC children in their journey and the public needs to allow for such losses to be recognised.

The Australian government needs to take action and address the enormous faults that have been made and rectify them so that future generations do not suffer as a result. For DC people remaining isolated in their grief and with no answers can be crippling. I know this all too well, however it does not have to be this way forever. It is important that the Australian government understands what a tragedy such practices have meant for hundreds of thousands of people.

I will never stop searching for T5, my paternal family, my eight siblings and the answers that I know will no doubt help me to feel that I truly know myself.

## References

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