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# Donor conception

## MICHAEL LINDEN

Michael Linden, Myfanwy Walker's biological father (see previous article), is a former sperm donor and active campaigner now for donor conception's global abolition. He writes two blogs on the issue: <[www.da-di.blogspot.com](http://www.da-di.blogspot.com)> and <[www.thedonorwhodared.blogspot.com](http://www.thedonorwhodared.blogspot.com)>.

The RSA is part of a consortium of progressive groups that holds lectures every Wednesday evening at Trades Hall in Carlton, Melbourne. (See 'lectures' at <[www.rationalist.com.au](http://www.rationalist.com.au)> for more details.) The following article is based on Michael Linden's address to this group on 6 December 2006.

The moral philosopher J David Velleman has said:

How odd it must be to go through life never knowing whether a sense of having met a man before is due to his being one's father.

How tantalizing to know that there is someone who could instantly show one a living rendition of deeply ingrained aspects of oneself.

How frustrating to know that one will never meet him.

Hello. My name is Michael Linden and I am a sperm donor.

In the spring of 1977, I provided ten ejaculates of my semen to a fertility clinic at the Royal Women's Hospital in Carlton.

Melbourne IVF, the successor to that clinic, has informed me that a total of five births resulted from medical inseminations utilising my sperm.

At that time, recipient couples were counselled, as a matter of course, *never* to tell their children how they really came to be: it was intended that they should grow up and forever remain in total ignorance of their donor-conceived status.

Certainly, I know that Myfanwy Walker and her brother Michael grew up in ignorance, until that fateful day in early 2001 when Myfanwy's mother told her of their true origins.

And it is with an equal certainty that I can state it is extremely unlikely that my other three children — my three lost daughters — will ever be told at all.

One of them was born in 1979 to a family who lived in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Another, in 1980, to a farming family in New South Wales. And, in 1982, a girl was born to a Turkish Muslim couple, both of whom were process workers in an inner suburb of Melbourne. I was told they chose my sperm because the clinic assured them they thereby had a chance of

having a blue-eyed child. With not a little irony, I have become accustomed to calling her my blue-eyed Turkish daughter.

As far as their parents are concerned, I am the man who never was.

And, even should those parents ever find the courage to stop living in deceit, I may only at best become the man who was never meant to be.

Indeed, the whole notion of conception by way of donated gametes is based upon a lie — or perhaps more so a series of lies — promulgated by a profound cynicism with regard to our most fundamental biological relationships.

These lies have come to permeate and inform every aspect of reproductive medicine, and have been reinforced by being duly enshrined in the legislation which governs it.

With respect to the donor, the fundamental lie is that, apart from being the source of a much-prized commodity, once his job is done he simply doesn't count.

And worse, by some perverse corollary, with regard to the fate of his children, it is assumed that he really doesn't care.

It is asserted that when he gave away his sperm he likewise gave away all claim to or connection with the resulting children.

And, really, how can he even claim to be their father when he didn't even fuck their mother?

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But just because he wasn't there doesn't mean he didn't do it.

The symbolic separation of the donor from his children begins with the encapsulation of his semen in a plastic vial. It is now outside of himself and, in virtue of the agreements he has signed with the clinic, outside of his jurisdiction. His sperm, that part of himself which has the ability to help create a new human life, has become medicalised, institutionalised, frozen.

The donor is encouraged to see his act as a supreme form of selfless giving, as if his sperm were like any other transferable body part such as a heart or a kidney, no more, no less.

He has given the recipient parents 'the gift of life', and the child, should they ever be informed, will be expected to be duly happy in the knowledge that, without this act of generosity, they would never have become a 'miracle baby'.

What the donor will not be told is that, in the crystal clarity of biological fact, his genetic inheritance has been injected into a foreign domain.

Although it is mediated by a clinical process, his role is that of an interloper who slips between the sheets of the marital bed and impregnates the wife of another man: a man who is infertile.

For, in its very essence, donor insemination is nothing more than a form of polyandry, which starts from the moment of conception, increases in complexity from the moment of birth, and is evidenced in every aspect of the family nexus.

The donor is always there, in every facet of the child which does not match that of their mother and, likewise, in every glaring dissimilarity between that child and the man who is not really their father.

The donor is always there as a shadow, as a third party in the marital relationship, and his ubiquitous presence informs every minute of every single day of that child's ascent to adulthood.

For the child is a half-alien. Like the egg of a cuckoo becoming a hatchling in a host-bird's nest.

For the parents there will always be stark reminders, or subtle jolts, that the child they are raising is not wholly their own.

The child also will grow up as if haunted by a half-remembered past and, even if they have not been informed of their origins, will be troubled by an innate sense of disjunction between what they are told and what they intuitively apprehend. They may look in the mirror but only recognise half of their self. For although they are truly mirrored in their mother, the man who purports to be their father cannot offer them an equal sense of identity. This psychic dismemberment has profound implications, for as J David Velleman points out:

What is most troubling about gamete donation is that it purposely severs a connection of the sort that normally informs a person's sense of identity, which is composed of elements that must bear emotional meaning, as only symbols and stories can. To downplay the symbolic and mythical significance of severing a child's connections to its biological parents is therefore to misrepresent what is really going on, if not because the symbols and stories are literally true, then at least because they are truly part of the human psyche.

To the parents, whether they would wish it or not, and whether they disclose it to their child or not, the child will always be the donor's child. He is the father of that child. This is an inescapable biological fact, and the fundamental reason why the continuing practice of donor insemination is a tragic if not a criminal mistake.

So, at this point, I think I should ask all of you this question: would any one of you here ever give away or even sell your children...?

I did. And so have hundreds of other men in this supposedly civilised country of ours.

Since the mid-1970s, something of the order of 20,000 to 30,000 children have been born in Australia by means of donor insemination. The vast majority of these children do not know it, but for all of them there is a man somewhere with whom they share the most basic biological connection. These men are their fathers.

Whether they realised it or not, what these men were really doing when they gave away their sperm was giving away their unborn children. Indeed, this is the sole purpose of the practice of donor conception: it is not so much the provision of the *means* of fertility to the infertile, but the exploitation of those who *are* fertile in order that they provide the infertile with the child that, as it is usually so plaintively phrased, they desire.

Yes, it is true: I never held my lost children in my arms when they were just born as I did with the three daughters of my first marriage.

And yes, it is true: I never felt the pain and anguish such as young mothers feel when their babies are wrenched from them into adoption, leaving them with a lifetime of sorrow.

But this does not mean that I cannot feel cheated, and at times even angry, that — even though I cannot deny my utter responsibility in choosing to donate — I may never get to meet those three remaining young women who are just as much my daughters as those I raised.

Just like some donor-conceived adults of my acquaintance, I am sometimes struck by a passing person in the street or elsewhere, by a fleeting resem-

blance, by a flash of recognition. And I wonder...

In 1992, in the *Utah Law Review*, the moral philosopher Daniel Callahan contributed an article entitled 'Bioethics and Fatherhood'.

I think I can categorically state that if I had had the benefit of his insights back in 1977, I would never have become a sperm donor and thereby relinquished my unborn children.

For this is some of what he has to say:

Biological fatherhood carries with it permanent and non-dispensable duties.

I believe there is no serious way of denying the moral seriousness of biological fatherhood and the existence of moral duties that follow from it.

The most important moral statement might be this: once a father always a father. Because the relationship is biological rather than contractual, the natural bond cannot be abrogated or put aside.

Does this mean that each and every father has a full set of moral obligations toward the children he procreates. My answer is yes.

To treat the matter otherwise is to assume that fatherhood *is* some kind of contractual relationship, one that can be put aside by some choice on the part of the father, or the mother and father together, or on the part of the state.

And, in extending his argument to donor insemination itself, Callahan deals it a crushing moral blow:

A sperm donor whose sperm is successfully used to fertilize an ovum, which ovum proceeds through the usual phases of gestation, is a *father*. Nothing more, nothing less.

He is as much a father biologically as the known sperm inseminator in a standard heterosexual relationship and sexual intercourse.

If he is thereby a biological father, he has all the duties of any other biological father.

It is morally irrelevant that (1) the donor does not want to act as a father, (2) those who collect his sperm

as medical brokers do not want him to act as a father, (3) the woman whose ovum he is fertilizing does not want him to act as a father, and (4) society is prepared to excuse him from the obligations of acting as a father.

Fatherhood, because it is a biological condition, cannot be abrogated by personal desires or legal decisions.

I have been criticised — and even sometimes by they who are otherwise firm opponents of donor conception — for publicly affirming in the media that I am the *real* — by which, of course, I mean biological — father of my medically conceived children.

Most recently, on a *Four Corners* episode dealing with donor conception, my statement to that effect was dramatically countered with the opinion of a social father. He was, of course, shocked that I should dare to reclaim fatherhood for myself in this way. But for me, to have stated otherwise would have been to condone and further propagate the lie.

For I must remain ever mindful that I and my fellow donors have been not just willing agents but also unwitting perpetrators of what I believe is an immense and tragic denial of the human rights of our children to know their true identity.

And I think it is high time for all men to acknowledge the moral dictums of Daniel Callahan, and give the lie to the degradation and

denial of biological fatherhood which donor insemination entails.

For sperm donation is not some great and noble act; it is to the contrary: male irresponsibility with regard to procreation conveniently elevated by the medical profession to the level of a praised social institution.

It really is time that we grew up and stopped all that wanking.

