Anonymity in donor-assisted conception and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Secrecy and anonymity in donor conception: origins and current trends

What is now known as donor insemination (DI) has been practised for at least several hundred years (Novaes, 1998). In what appears to be the first detailed account of its successful use, in Philadelphia in 1884, the recipient, who had been previously anaesthetised, did not know that she had been inseminated by Professor William Pancoast using sperm from his “best looking” medical student. Although the woman’s sterile husband was told about Pancoast’s ministrations, he was instructed never to tell his wife. It is likely their son did not know of the circumstances of his conception, although he probably subsequently met his donor. One of Pancoast’s students, Addison Hard, claimed that he had “shake[n] the hand of the young man” who had been conceived as a result of the insemination (at the same time inviting speculation that Hard himself had been that “best looking” student) (Daniels, 1998; Gregoire and Mayer, 1965). Twentieth century British DI pioneers, Mary Barton and Margaret Jackson, were subject to considerable public, political and professional opprobrium (Barton, Walker and Wiesner, 1945; Snowden and Mitchell, 1981; Snowden, Mitchell and Snowden, 1983). Thus, this “unorthodox medical procedure led to the reinforcement of a perceived need for discretion, particularly in those circumstances in which physicians resorted to an anonymous semen provider” (Novaes, 1998, p. 110). Consequently, up until relatively recently, DI was practised under conditions that espoused both secrecy and anonymity. As recently as 1987, the UK’s Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists was advising prospective DI recipients: “unless you reveal [DI conception] to your child, there is no reason for him or her ever to know that he or she was conceived by donor insemination” (Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 1987, p. 3).

In a survey of international trends undertaken by the Council of Europe (1998), providing data from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the USA and