



Donor Conception Network



Planning a family using donor insemination: a letter from Olivia to would-be DI Mums

Dear Would-Be DI Mum

When my partner and I talked about having a baby, it wasn't any baby I had in mind but the baby we would make between us...perhaps even HIS baby, because of his lovely blue eyes, his way of explaining things, his patience...because we loved each other. How could we now be thinking the unthinkable...considering having a baby using an unknown sperm donor!

A number of years ago this was my situation. Perhaps it is yours now. Today we have two teenagers conceived from different donors. They are as wonderful and different as any siblings and we are beginning to face another life stage...the empty nest. But then there were a troubling range of feelings and issues to face before making the decision to go ahead and use DI to help make our family.

First Feelings

The final nail was driven into our hopes of having children genetically connected to both of us with a terse statement from the hospital consultant, delivered whilst my husband still had his trousers round his knees. "You haven't got a hope in hell of having children. Don't try any quack treatments, they don't work...goodbye". We weren't offered any options at all and there was certainly no counselling. Out into the bleak London streets we staggered, shell-shocked by the finality and lack of hope, but not surprised. The writing had been on the wall since the first sperm test done through our GP.

I had wondered how I would feel at this moment. Would I be angry, or sad, despairing or simply disappointed? Would I still fancy him? How could we continue to have sex and know that it could never result in a baby, no matter how carefully we timed our lovemaking? (and yes, it had been getting mechanical in our efforts to conceive).

The feelings were tumultuous. How were we going to get beyond this point?

Today, things can be a bit different

Of course today, because of Intra-cytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), the final door slam of being told that having your own genetically related children is not going to be possible, can take place much further down the road. I think in some ways it was easier for us. When we had recovered from our shell-shock and investigated our options, they were very clear; DI, adoption or childlessness. ICSI is a most wonderful advance which holds out the hope of genetic

fatherhood for many men with fertility problems. But when the final news comes that even this is not going to work, it is perhaps an even greater blow because of the hope it gave.

How Do Men Feel?

And how is your man feeling about all this anyway? It's not always easy to tell. So many men have become used to covering up how they really feel about anything. It doesn't mean they don't have strong feelings, it just means that they often find it difficult to show them, particularly to put them into words. You may be exploding with the need to talk with him about the situation and he turns on the TV, goes out to play sport, retreats to his own space, be it the pub, the shed in the garden or the computer...anything BUT talk about it! This is not true for all men of course, but I've spoken to enough people through the Network to know it is a frequent response. I remember feeling frustrated by my husband's unwillingness to talk very much. I assumed he must be feeling terrible, perhaps less of a man, although he denied anything of the sort. Over the years I have come to understand that the main grief **for him** was realisation of the loss of continuation of his family line, although he couldn't say so at the time and perhaps didn't even fully recognise it himself. It's different for each person.

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Many men, still reeling from the shock of their test results, have been known to offer to leave the marriage or partnership in order to give their partner the freedom to seek a man who can give them children. They assume we won't want them any more because they 'can't produce the goods'. Although it is true that infertility has NO physical connection to sexuality or sexual potency, some men do feel so belittled that they may shy away from sexual contact for a while and/or become temporarily impotent following diagnosis of infertility. If you are able to give it, sensitive reassurance of his place in your bed as well as your heart may help.

Men's reactions to news of their infertility vary hugely, but anger (why me?), shame and/or the need for emotional withdrawal are typical. They are likely to be feeling very vulnerable but may not be able to ask for or accept care and support. Showing you understand and respect his feelings (whatever they are) and offering loving support (even if he finds it hard to accept) is the first step in facing whatever the future holds together. But you may need to have someone understand how you feel first.

How Do Women Feel?

Shock, despair, anger (towards partner, God, doctors, mother-in-law), disappointment, deep sadness (at not being able to have a loved partner's child) protectiveness (towards partner and family privacy) are all part of the seesawing emotions women are likely to go through.

It may be that time is running out for your fertility and this news comes as even more of a body blow. The dilemma is that men and women often have very different ways of dealing with these feelings. Typically as women we take on the role of comforter and carer but in a situation like this we need comfort and care for ourselves too. We may try to ease our partner's pain with the approach that we would want for ourselves.

But this doesn't always work as men and women have very different ways of handling emotionally charged news and situations. Many couples I have spoken to have said that just at a time when they needed to be close together, they had never felt further apart because they felt they could not get through to each other.

The truth is that infertility is a very testing time for relationships. Those who have come through it and felt stronger as a result, indicate that the key is for each partner to respect the other as an individual who needs to take their own time in their own way to deal with their feelings. It can also be helpful if each partner can let the other know

what they need (quiet, space, talk, information gathering) and be prepared to negotiate about each getting some of these needs met.

For instance, one couple agreed to talk at the weekends about fertility issues (to meet the woman's need to share her feelings with her partner and for them to begin to make some decisions), but not to bring the subject up every night when they had a meal together (to meet his need to mull things over quietly). It was also agreed that it was fine for her to share her feelings with her mother and a close woman friend, so that she could break her sense of isolation and get some everyday support.

Some women have an overwhelming instinct to protect their man from the cruel and unthinking jibes of outsiders (references to being a 'jaffa' or 'shooting blanks' are not uncommon in groups of men), and so do not talk to anyone about the situation. But in not sharing information about their partner's fertility problems with others they find themselves cut off from potential support. This in turn can put unbearable pressure on the relationship with their partner.

Another way that women sometimes seek to protect their man is to 'take the blame' for the fertility difficulties and pretend that it is hers. This can seem like a really caring and generous act but the likely effect is to push the feelings of both partners under the carpet.

It also denies the man the opportunity to work through how he feels and accept himself as the same person he was before the diagnosis of infertility, only perhaps now stronger and wiser. Pushing feelings under the carpet is rarely a good idea anyway as they tend to creep out when you are least expecting in the form of anger, resentment and tension, which make for difficulties with relationships.

In my own case, it took a gestation time of nine months from the final diagnosis of my husband's infertility to making the decision to go ahead with DI. During that time we each grieved for the child we could not have together but spoke only occasionally about what each was going through.

I researched hospitals and clinics and we got ourselves on the books of a small private clinic so that we could go ahead with treatment as soon as we were ready to make a positive decision. One of the keys to finding the answer that is right for both of you seems to be TIME, but it didn't take me nine months to find out that I did still fancy him!

Feelings before, during and after treatment

What about insemination itself? When it comes to thinking about using a donor, many women find the idea (and sometimes the experience) of another man's sperm being put inside them really weird. I have heard some women say that it felt like adultery, although it wasn't like that for me. Adultery involves intimate contact with another person and this is unquestionably a clinical procedure. Men too can be very angry and/or upset by the insemination process if they haven't had the opportunity to think through their feelings about infertility and the reality of using donor insemination, before treatment begins.

Feeling angry that it is you who is going to have to go through treatment when the fertility difficulty is not yours, is a very normal part of the process of coming to terms with what is happening to you both. If, however, you find yourself remaining angry at the start of treatment, then this may be an indication that there are still issues to be addressed. Talking with a counsellor, either at the clinic or outside, may well help resolve matters.

Some couples like to go to treatment sessions together. In some clinics it is possible for the potential Dad to take an active part in the process by pressing the plunger on the insemination syringe, if this is what both partners want. For others the insemination process feels so much like 'just another clinic appointment' that the man either sits in the waiting room or doesn't attend at all. I remember popping round to the clinic in my lunch hour. It would have felt really odd to drag my partner away from work. We are all different. What is important is that whatever way you play it, both of you agree.

In my experience women have a very wide range of feelings about their sperm donor. For some, he is a very real person whom they think about and attribute qualities to. For others he is a shadowy figure to whom they feel grateful but really don't want to think too much about. Others find it difficult to acknowledge his contribution at all. This spectrum of feelings is likely to be affected by how much information the clinic provides (either spontaneously or on being asked), the way and manner in which they provide it and how comfortable a woman feels with the decision to use donor sperm.

Many women have strange dreams and fantasies during the time when they are thinking about and hoping to have a baby. Those of us using donated sperm are no different and may even have fantasies which are stronger and go

on for a longer time. Before I became pregnant with my first DI child I had dreams that I was growing a monster inside me. I made sense of this by telling myself that I was worried about the unknown aspect of using a donor. For me, the fears and fantasies went away as soon as I became pregnant, but for some women the dreams continue throughout pregnancy. Luckily, they don't seem to have an impact on how we are likely to feel about the child when it is born. I didn't have fantasies before conceiving my second DI child.

Who Needs to Know

Why does anyone need to know, you may be wondering? Why expose your partner to potential ridicule, why risk rejection by family and friends, why put doubts in your child's mind about who their father is? These are all questions that are likely to be running through your mind. But you might take some time to look at the other side; what is behind the making of jokes about infertility and do I want to go along with that sort of thinking?; are close family and friends really likely to reject us just because we are building our family in a slightly different way?; if we feel we have to hide the way our child has been made, doesn't this mean we are in some way ashamed and isn't a child likely to sense this but not understand it's meaning? Shame and fear are usually behind the keeping of secrets. Is this a good basis for starting family life?

Why should difficulties with fertility be shameful? Sadly male infertility has over the centuries become connected in popular folk myth to sexual impotency. The term impotent is often used to mean being without power and being powerful seems in many cultures to be the essence of being a man.

As I have said above there is in reality NO connection between infertility and sexual impotency. Men remain as effective lovers as ever they were before the diagnosis. But without the power to impregnate a woman a man can feel less of a man and can also be the butt of cruel jokes from other men. This sad state of affairs has been challenged by DC Network. The Network contains many men who genuinely have not felt shame about their infertility or have decided to challenge the myth because they felt that it was inappropriate in a modern world and that they did not want to start family life carrying a secret about which they felt shame. They have decided to tell close family and friends and in the vast majority of cases have received support and encouragement. Where they feared rejection, they typically instead found acceptance, admiration, respect and warmth.

One of the reasons that men and women in the Network have decided to take on the myths about male infertility is that they do not want the relationship with their children to be clouded by feelings of shame. Some people conceived by donor insemination and who are now adults have spoken clearly about feeling very distant from their fathers; they felt in retrospect that their father held himself aloof from making a proper relationship with them. Whatever the complicated reasons for this, modern fatherhood demands a much more hands-on type of relationship. Keeping shameful secrets only leads to emotional withdrawal through fear of rejection (on either side). How sad that a child should grow up wondering why their Dad doesn't want to be close to them.

Sharing information with children

Having broken the silence about infertility it follows that we believe in not keeping secrets from children about their origins. The full reasons for being open with children and how to go about this process is the subject of the leaflet Dear Would-Be DI Parents (available from your clinic or through DC Network) which I urge you to read.

As a fertile woman it is the complete truth to say that I have never regretted using donor insemination to build our family. My huge sadness at not being able to have HIS baby moved on over the years to become a great sense of fulfilment and completeness with the children we did have. On the way we became closer as a couple because of what we had been through together. As the mother of two teenagers I cannot

imagine what life would be like if we had not been 'open' with them from a very young age. The relationship we have with these two very individual young people is close and warm (given the usual slammed door or two!) and characterised by a mutual respect and honesty. They are lovely.

If you are considering using a donor to assist in building your family -

- Take your time about making the decision and don't even think about going ahead until you have your partner fully on board
- Talk to your partner and others. Seek or take up all offers of counselling – a third party can really help make it feel safe to talk about difficult feelings.
- Join a support group. Ask at your clinic if there is one locally but the Donor Conception Network is custom made for you.
- Be proud of what you are doing. It may not be HIS baby, but parenting is all about recognising your child as an individual anyway. It is a rich and rewarding experience I would not have missed and continue to enjoy.

With very best wishes
Olivia

Further support and information

The Donor Conception Network was started in 1993 by a group of families who had all chosen to be open with their children about their origins. We wanted to help break the isolation felt by so many people using donor assisted conception methods, and to share our experiences of talking to our children, and to family and friends, about DI and more recently egg donation. We have two national meetings a year, one in London and one in the North of England, produce a Newsletter twice yearly, have a library of books, videos, audio tapes and articles that can be borrowed and, most importantly, we put people in touch with each other.

Network Membership

You can join the network as an individual or a couple. Annual subscriptions are £15 (£5 unwaged). To join download a membership form from the website or simply send a cheque to our PO Box below.

The Donor Conception Network is a registered charity, registration number 1041297

Useful addresses

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Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

30 Artillery Lane
London
E1 7LS
0207 377 5077
website: www.hfea.gov.uk

British Infertility Counselling Association

69 Division Street
Sheffield
S1 4GE
Information line: 01342 843880
Website: www.bica.net

Letters in the Planning a Family Series

A letter from Walter to would-be DI Dads
A letter from Olivia to would-be DI Mums
A letter from Olivia to would-be DI Parents about "telling"
A letter from Emily to single would-be mums
A letter from Rachel to would-be egg donation parents

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