

I was fathered by an anonymous donor

The act will have been brief impersonal and utterly bereft of emotion – but 25 years on, the moment that Caroline Halstead was conceived is causing her lasting heartache. For she was fathered by an anonymous sperm donor and, like a growing number conceived in this way, she has struggled to come to terms with the fact that she is the product of a scientific process rather a loving union.

‘I was conceived in a *petri dish* by artificial insemination at a Harley Street Clinic in London’ she says, describing the fertility treatment her mother sought when her husband was diagnosed as infertile.

In my view, it is a horrible, clinical way to be conceived. All my life I’ve felt as if I’m only half a person.’ A Surrey housewife and mother who is expecting her second child in August, Caroline is haunted by the thought of conception and the fact that, unlike her children, she will never know or even meet her biological father. Her feelings are far from isolated. A new study, the first of its kind into the effects of donor conception on offspring, reveals the complex and often troubling emotions adults born in this way can experience. They feel confusion, isolation and hurt more acutely even than those who have been adopted.

Nearly half of those surveyed by the Commission on Parenthood’s Future were disturbed that money was involved in their conception. More than half admitted that whenever they see someone who looks like them they wonder if they’re related. And two-thirds affirmed the

right of donor-conceived children to know the truth about their origins.

Compare Caroline's testimony with that of social worker Narelle Grace, 27 who lives in West London. **She also views her conception, using an anonymous donor sperm, as a cold, medical transaction.** 'I don't like the word "donor" because it sounds so clinical', she says. 'This man wasn't donating blood, he was donating life. 'There are huge implications to this and I think every donor child should at least have basic information about their father – who he was, where he came from, what family he has.'

Since April 1 2005, the law allows donor offspring the right to identify their biological parents when they reach adulthood, but this can't apply retrospectively. So many – like Narelle and Caroline, conceived before that date will never find the missing half of their identity.

Moreover, since the change in the law has led to a shortage of donors in Britain, many would be parents travel abroad for donor IVF treatment to countries – including the US and Spain where there is no legal obligation to identify donors. Each year since 1992 around 2000 children have been born annually in Britain from donor eggs or sperm. So the identity crisis felt by donor children is set to worsen in the years ahead.

As it is, Narelle, like Caroline, knows only the sparsest of details about the person who gave her life, after her mother and the man she long thought was her father were unable to conceive naturally.

Narelle's student donor was brown eyed, brown-haired and 5'7" tall and would have been paid a relatively small

sum. He also provided sperm that created eight other children; each of them a half-brother or half-sister to Narelle. 'Out there in the world is a whole family I will never know and who will never know me', she says

But here I am, a young woman who is desperate to find out anything I can about him.

'Adoption is very different – not only can you usually find your real parents, but also you don't have to cope with the psychological effects of knowing you were conceived in a test tube. That's unsettling and weird.'

'Being a sperm donor child makes you question everything about your humanity'.

'I can honestly say that no matter how desperate I might be for a child, I'd never use a sperm donor. I wouldn't condemn any child to grow up as I did'.

Caroline, too is deeply angry with the man who gave her life, even though it may have been done with the best of intentions to assist couples who could not conceive naturally.

'It isn't fair just to go along and donate sperm and then not give a thought to the product of that sperm.' She says. 'He's my father and I have no idea who he is. I think it would be easier if I was the product of a one-night stand – at least then there would have been a connection between two people.'

It is a view with which Josephine Quintavalle of 'Corethics', an organisation that comments on reproductive ethics, has some sympathy:

‘A woman donating eggs goes through a potentially risky invasive procedure. By contrast, it is quick, easy and risk-free to donate sperm.’ she says. So you can imagine that a sperm donor might make the decision to do so quite carelessly especially when money is involved. ‘There is the sense, too, with say conception outside the womb that you’re creating a product in a laboratory. ‘And the more these processes move into the IVF lab, the further we distance ourselves from the beauty and significance of the natural act of conception.’

To compound the disquiet that surrounds their conception, children are often not told the truth about their birth by the parents who raise them. ‘Men often feel uneasy about infertility, so where assisted reproductive techniques are concerned there is more secrecy about sperm donation than any other method.’ says clinical forensic psychologist, professor Robert Edeimann: ‘But a family secret is never a good thing. And if suddenly a child, or worse, an adolescent discovers that the man they thought was their biological Dad in fact is not, it can have devastating consequences. It can cause a major imbalance in the family and lead to the child’s rejection of the biological parent’. For nurse, Chloe Proctor, 22, who experienced just such a revelation when she was 19, the results were overwhelming and destructive. ‘I found out I was donor-conceived in the middle of an argument,’ says Chloe who lives in Bolton with her partner, Michael. ‘It was the worst possible way to be told – the man I thought was my father suddenly said: “That’s it. I’ve had enough. There’s something I need to tell you right now”. The shocking news was then imparted with shocking disregard for Chloe’s feelings. ‘My brother and I were told that we were conceived

using donor sperm. We were shell-shocked, and it has affected me to this day.'

The last word goes to ethics expert Josephine Quintavaille: 'All the time legislation is moving to accommodate the interests of the adult who wants a child, but the child's interests are not considered. In the interests of political correctness, our society has decided that a father can be anyone or nobody. But did anyone ask the child how they feel about this?'