

THE £35 BABY BOOM



With registered sperm donors in short supply, thousands of women are taking matters into their own hands and tracking down donors online, paying a £35 fee to find the perfect no-strings dad. Sian Lewis investigates

Jennifer*, 36, stares at her computer screen, scrolling through the online details of hundreds of men. A few minutes later she strikes gold – he's tall, with dark hair and blue eyes. And he lives just down the road. 'I think I've found Mr Right,' she calls to husband Andy*. 'Come and have a look, he looks just like you, and he's done this before – sounds perfect.' No, Jennifer isn't looking to spice up the marital bed. Instead, she's one of a growing number of women shopping online for a sperm donor.

'This is hardly how I imagined the conception of my first child,' admits Jennifer. 'When we found out last year that Andy is sterile, we were devastated. A friend had conceived through IVF with donor sperm, so we approached our GP, who explained the waiting list was two years minimum. By that time, I could be too old to conceive. I spent months grieving for the child I thought I'd never have.'

Then an internet search for infertility support groups led Jennifer to a website with adverts from both sperm donors and women in need. 'I couldn't believe what I was seeing,' says Jennifer. 'I knew the UK has a shortage of sperm donors, and we'd been considering spending thousands on IVF, yet here were nearly 1,000 donors on just one website – and none were even charging, they just wanted to help. All you had to pay was £35 for a month's membership. I registered that night and wrote an advert explaining how much Andy and I wanted a child.'

'Three weeks later, we've now chosen a donor from the 10 who responded. We're hoping to meet him for the first time in a few weeks. We've decided not to tell anyone yet – I want to focus on getting pregnant – but we will afterwards. We're not ashamed, and hopefully we can make any

child see that they have no reason to be either. Some people might be shocked, but I'm convinced this is our best chance to have a baby.'

THE NEW MATCHMAKING

It's easy to see why Jennifer would think that. According to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), which regulates sperm banks, the number of registered donors has been falling for 10 years, while the number of couples with problems conceiving has risen to a shocking one in seven. Demand for donor sperm has never been higher.

While the HFEA insists the 2005 law removing anonymity for sperm donors hasn't put men off, there are now only 307 registered sperm donors in the UK. Pity the poor donor who has to 'service' the whole of Scotland on his own.

Plus, with every registered donor confined to a strict 10-family limit, the ever growing waiting lists at many sperm banks are just too long for many women to risk. So, like Jennifer, they're taking matters into their own hands.

Ahead of the trend was therapist Emma Hartnell-Baker, who, while searching for a sperm donor online in 2005, spotted a gap in the market for a website which allowed donors and recipients to hook up, without the hefty fees of private clinics. So she launched www.free-sperm-donations.com. There can be up to 150 women online at any one time.

'It's like internet dating with a twist. Women can search our 900-strong donor database by area, ethnicity, height and age. They read about the donors' backgrounds, personalities and hobbies and get a feel for the man who might father their child. When they find a match, they email them >

'SOME PEOPLE MIGHT SAY I'M PLAYING GOD'

John*, 46, a doctor from Manchester, set up his own sperm donation website three years ago.

'I spent 23 years in a happy marriage. When it ended, I felt lost. Thankfully, I'm still close to my three children. Maybe that's why, when a lesbian friend told me how she wanted a child with her partner of six years, I offered to help.'

'Donating sperm that first time four years ago felt weird. I've never slept around, but I did HIV and STD tests. The mum-to-be worked out her cycle and on the right day we checked into a hotel. I did my thing in the bathroom while she waited on the bed. Then I handed her a vial of my sperm and left. I could hardly believe what I'd done.'

'But it worked, and nine months later she gave birth. It was such a high knowing that I'd helped create that life. I considered donating again through a clinic, but hated the idea of not being able to choose who I helped.'

'So, in 2004, I set up my website. I'd never charge for my services – to me that would be like selling babies. I get 30-40 emails a week. I choose women who live within a few hours' drive. We talk on the phone for months before I'll agree to meet them, then I visit their house so I can see where the child will grow up. I only agree to donate if we all get on. Some might say I'm playing God, but isn't that my right?'

'I make it clear I don't want to be part of the child's life. If any of the children need my help in the future, I'll have to cross that bridge when I come to it. I've never told my family and friends what I do. I'd hate my children to be hurt, although, hopefully, if they ever do find out, they'll understand what drove me.'

'I've now fathered two babies. A third is on the way, and I have two enquiries pending. After that, I think I'll stop.'

THE TRUTH ABOUT DONOR INSEMINATION

- One in seven UK couples has trouble conceiving
- 645 children were born after donor insemination in 2005
- Average success rates

for donor insemination are similar to IVF: 13.4% for women under 35, 9.7% for 35-39-year-olds, 3.9% for 40-42-year-olds and 1.7% for 43-44-year-olds

- There are currently only 307 sperm donors within UK clinics. Each man can only donate to 10 families before they have to 'retire'. For more information, visit www.hfea.gov.uk.

REPORT

and take things from there. For many women, this is the answer to their prayers.'

It's not just a shortage of registered donors forcing women online. The sense of control and choice is a powerful draw for many, like 32-year-old physiotherapist Jane*. 'In an ideal world, I'd be able to conjure up my dream man, we'd fall in love and have children. Obviously, life doesn't work like that. Turning 30 with no guarantee I'd meet anyone anytime soon made me realise that if I wanted a baby, I'd have to go it alone.'

Horrified by the idea of a one-night stand and put off by the clinical anonymity of IVF, it wasn't until Jane saw an article on sperm donation websites that she knew she'd found what she needed. 'It's comforting to hand-pick a donor, just like you'd choose a man. I wanted someone healthy with the same level of education as me. We agreed to no contact after the birth, but he's happy for my child to contact him later in life.'

Jane has just completed her first round of artificial insemination. 'He came to my house and went into the bathroom, while a friend and I waited in the kitchen. Then he gave me his fresh sperm in a vial and left. Afterwards, I lay on the bed and inseminated myself, praying it'd work.'

Sadly, this time she didn't fall pregnant, but Jane and her donor are both determined to keep trying. 'I feel really positive; I'm sure this will work for me,' she says.

A SECRET PAST

Unlike many women using these websites, Jane has been completely open about it. 'All my friends are mothers and they weren't even shocked by what I was doing. My parents have been wonderful, too; they know I've been broody for years. It's a huge relief to know I've got a great support network and it means I can be totally honest with my child. Anyway, why should I be ashamed? If people think it's sleazy, do they think it would be better if I had a one-night stand? No

one used to really talk about adoption or having IVF; maybe this is just the next step.'

Infertility guru Zita West (www.zitawest.com), who counsels women considering assisted conception, agrees. 'It used to be if you couldn't conceive, you kept quiet,' she explains. 'Now, with more women having problems getting pregnant, often because they leave it later, and more single women deciding to have a child alone, there's no longer any shame in admitting you've used IVF or donor sperm – however you found it.'

Despite welcoming increased access to donors, Zita urges women to consider the impact shopping for sperm online could have on their children. 'You must be open about it, otherwise they'll think you're ashamed of how you had them – and therefore of them,' she says. 'At some point, most children will want to know about their father, so think twice before severing all ties with a donor. Your child could resent you later on.'

Another thing they won't thank you for is not checking out their donor father's health. 'Clinics are heavily regulated to keep patients safe,' says Susan Seenan from Infertility UK (www.infertilitynetworkuk.com). 'These websites aren't governed by law, so you need to take responsibility for your own safety. Make sure you see donors' blood-test results, don't just take someone's word they're clean.'

Even if your donor provides test results for HIV and STDs, there's no way of knowing if he's carrying a hereditary condition that could affect your child. 'The safest thing would be to ask any donor you meet online to donate via a clinic, then you know his sperm will be tested for everything, including DNA and chromosomal abnormalities,' advises Susan. 'Plus, you can get the clinic to "wash" his sperm clean of impurities so it stands a better chance of getting you pregnant.' And at the end of the day, that's what's driving these sites – that overwhelming urge for a baby. Let's just hope it doesn't come at too big a price. □

'MEETING OUR DONOR WAS LIKE A BIZARRE FIRST DATE'

Michele*, 37, a teacher from Brighton, and her husband Brian* didn't want to waste thousands on IVF that might not work.

'Ever since I was a little girl, I've wanted to be a mum. When I fell for Brian, who already has three children, it never crossed my mind we'd have problems conceiving. Four years ago, after a year of trying, tests showed that Brian is now sterile. It hit us both hard.'

'I thought our only option was IVF, using donor sperm. We were refused NHS treatment because Brian already has children, so we faced going private. At a hefty £4,000 a time, it would drain our savings, but we both agreed it was worth it. Then I came across www.free-sperm-donations.com. I'd been told donors were in short supply, but here were more than 900, all offering their services for free. For £34.95, you could use the site for 30 days. If you couldn't find a donor in that time, you could keep trying for £19.95 a month.'

'I loved the idea of being able to choose donors. Trying to get pregnant when nature's not on your side leaves you feeling helpless – this way I'd be in control. I worried how Brian might react, but he reasoned that being able to meet our donor gave us a better chance of ensuring our child would look like us.'

'We registered on the website four months ago and stressed that any donor agreed to future contact from our child. You never know if a child will want to trace their biological parents. We also chose a donor who lives nearby. After many emails and phone calls, we met. It was bizarre – like going on a first date, but with your husband next to you.'

'Our donor showed us test results for STDs and told us his family history. Now we're waiting a few months while I work out my cycle. When I'm ready, he'll come to our house and we'll use an artificial insemination kit.'

'We haven't told anyone we've gone online – if it works, we'll tell them then. We both feel our child should know as soon as they can understand the idea of a mummy and daddy; if it's not a big secret, they won't feel any stigma. I hope that by the time they start school, shopping for a sperm donor online will be as normal as having IVF.'

ARE SPERM DONOR SITES LEGAL?

Paula Woodward, from the Human Fertilisation and Embryo Authority (HFEA), says, 'Anyone handling sperm for implantation has to be licensed, but these websites seem to operate outside the law because they claim to act only as a "connection service" between donors and recipients.' So there's no legal protection for you, but what about the donor? Under the HFEA Act 1990, no donor is legally the father of any child born via a clinic. They can't ask

to be involved in their life and aren't responsible for that child – but this doesn't cover websites. To protect yourself online, solicitor Natalie Gamble, the UK's leading expert on fertility law, advises:

- **Married couples using artificial insemination (AI) at home are protected – legally the husband, not the donor, is the father. Single women have no protection, so seek legal advice.**

- Even if you meet online, consider using a fertility

clinic for your insemination so you can legally prevent your donor seeking involvement with your child later on.

- **Never put your donor's name on the birth certificate, and draw up a donor's agreement. It might not be 100% legally binding if a judge decides at a later date it's not in the child's best interests – but it's better than nothing. Any potential problems might also be resolved as you discuss the 'contract'.**