

Five Things You Need to Know About the Egg and Sperm “Donation” Industry

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The World Egg and Sperm Bank, located in Arizona, boasts that since 2004 it has been the leader in making “building a family simple.” Egg donors are told they can “make an impact by helping grow a family,” and sperm donors are told that they can “change the world, and the world will change you.” These altruistic-sounding messages lure young men and women in need of money to respond by selling their genetic material and their future children, with little understanding of the medical, ethical, and legal issues at stake.

Much of my work has focused on these ethical questions surrounding in vitro fertilization (IVF) and what is called third-party reproduction, which includes surrogacy and the use of egg “donation” and/or sperm “donation.” But who are these mostly anonymous men and women selling their genetic material? What are the rights of “donor-conceived” children to know and be known by their biological parents and extended family? What are the risks to the short- and long-term health of women who sell their eggs and children born of assisted reproductive technologies? These are important questions that policymakers need to address.

While egg and sperm “donation” may seem like a net positive for society, there are five things you need to know about this industry.

1. Egg and sperm “donation” is a misnomer.

I intentionally use quotations around the words “donor” and “donation” because most harvested eggs and sperm are bought and sold, not donated. The global egg market is currently worth almost \$4 billion and is projected to hit \$5.3 billion by 2030.¹ The global sperm market is almost \$5 billion, with growth to \$6.5 billion predicted by 2032.² Both eggs and sperm are small and can be frozen and shipped all over the world, making this an easy global market for buying and selling human gametes (egg and sperm). Since the procedure of egg retrieval and egg harvesting is onerous and risky, women who sell their eggs are paid thousands of dollars in many cases. Men may make up to \$1,500 a month for two “donations” a week since sperm “donation” requires no medical procedures or drugs and very little time.³

1 “Egg Donation Market,” Verified Market Reports, February 2025, <https://www.verifiedmarketreports.com/product/egg-donation-market/>.

2 “Global Sperm Bank Market Size, Share, and COVID-19 Analysis,” Spherical Insights, July 2023, <https://www.sphericalinsights.com/reports/sperm-bank-market>.

3 Swati Chalumuri, “7 Highest Paying Sperm Banks (+Compensation 2025),” Hear Me Folks, January 10, 2025, <https://hearmefolks.com/get-paid-to-donate-sperm/>.

2. Egg and sperm “donation” targets vulnerable men and women.

Advertising around the buying and selling of gametes is slick and enticing. Words like “be an angel” target women considering selling their eggs, and slogans like “inside every hero, there are a million more” refer to the man as the hero for his millions of sperm. Language like “help build a family” and “give the gift of life” is coupled with promises of money and sometimes offers of free vacations. But there is no real gift being given because the companies running this advertising are buying and selling gametes. These markets heavily target people in need of money, often university students who are strapped for cash.

3. Egg and sperm “donation” can harm “donors” physically and psychologically.

The practice of sperm donation itself carries very little medical risk to the man’s health. But pornography plays a role in sperm collection, and its effects on men should not be ignored—especially when medical professionals are encouraging its use.

For the egg donor, however, there are serious short- and long-term health risks. The most serious short-term risk is ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS), which is caused by the fertility drugs the woman takes to encourage her ovaries to produce as many as sixty eggs in one cycle.⁴ This can cause swelling and fluid retention in the abdomen and can put the woman at risk for strokes due to blood clots, kidney failure, and shortness of breath due to abdominal swelling. Longer-term risks are damage to the woman’s own fertility, along with cancer risks associated with the fertility drugs.⁵ But since egg donors aren’t tracked and

monitored, the data we have on these risks is paltry.⁶ I have interviewed many egg donors who have later suffered strokes, life-threatening hemorrhaging, loss of their own fertility, and cancer. These women were not informed of such risks because Big Fertility tells them there are “no known risks.” That claim can only be made, though, because the phenomenon of taking otherwise young women with healthy fertility and putting them on powerful hormones to harvest their eggs has not been adequately studied.

The psychological risks to both the egg and sperm donor may become apparent only later, to those who realize they may have dozens or even hundreds of children born from their gamete. This can be especially distressing to women who lost their fertility while selling their eggs and know they will never be able to conceive.

4. Egg and sperm “donors” are selected based on their looks, health, or IQ.

The targeting of gamete sellers is specific to the ethnicity, age, intellect, religion, medical history, and general background of the individual. Ivy League donors are highly desirable and can often fetch six-figure compensation.⁷ One agency offers personal concierge service to people looking to buy eggs and sperm, boasting that its large database can have customers matched with the perfect donor in two to three weeks.⁸

4 Pratap Kumar, Sameer Farouk Sait, Alok Sharma, and Mukesh Kumar, “Ovarian Hyperstimulation Syndrome,” *Journal of Human Reproductive Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2011): 70–75, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3205536/>.

5 Jennifer Schneider, Jennifer Lahl, and Wendy Kramer, “Long-Term Breast Cancer Risk Following Ovarian

Stimulation in Young Egg Donors: A Call for Follow-Up, Research and Informed Consent,” *Reproductive BioMedicine Online* 34, no. 5 (2017): 480–85, [https://www.rbmojournal.com/article/S1472-6483\(17\)30048-2/fulltext](https://www.rbmojournal.com/article/S1472-6483(17)30048-2/fulltext).

6 Emily Woodruff, “‘We Simply Don’t Know’: Egg Donors Face Uncertain Long-Term Risks,” *STAT*, January 28, 2017, <https://www.statnews.com/2017/01/28/egg-donors-risks/>.

7 “Donor Compensation,” My Egg Bank, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.myeggbank.com/for-donors/donor-compensation>.

8 Donor Concierge, homepage, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.donorconcierge.com/>.

5. Donor-conceived children often suffer the most.

The narrative donor-conceived children are often told is about how they were so wanted by their parents. This is often true, but as the donor-conceived community grows and shares experiences as part of the search for biological parents, siblings, and extended family members, it becomes clear that there is much more to the story. The phenomenon of “genealogical bewilderment,” often experienced by adoptees, has been expanded to include donor-conceived children.⁹ Genealogical bewilderment is the struggle that comes when one’s personal identity is a mystery. The widespread fascination with genealogy demonstrates, at a minimum, curiosity about one’s origins. Whom do I look like? Why does no one else in my family share my interests? Do my biological parents ever think about me and wonder where I am? Do I have siblings in the world? The longing for answers to questions like these can lead to stress and anguish that cannot be satisfied by just saying that a child was so wanted. This is in large part why donor-conceived people are taking advantage of services like 23andMe and Ancestry.com to find their family. Matches are made everyday thanks to databases like the Donor Sibling Registry, founded in 2000 by Wendy Kramer and her son Ryan. Ryan was born from anonymous sperm donation, and as he got older he longed to find his biological father. Ryan eventually did find his father. Wendy realized that no such group existed to help people like her son. Now the registry has matched tens of thousands of people to the family. There have also been numerous stories of fertility doctors impregnating their unsuspecting female patients¹⁰ and young

men literally siring hundreds of children.¹¹ This is a more complex web to untangle as husbands and their wives discover the children, they have raised children they thought were their biological children are indeed not. The impact on these children is severe as well as they learn of their story of origin and the knowledge that their biological parents and half-siblings are perhaps numerous and scattered around the world.

Slowly, international laws are changing to provide this information to donor-conceived people in search of family ties. In the United States, Colorado is the only state that has prohibited the practice of anonymous egg and sperm donation.¹²

Medicine is tasked first with doing no harm. Egg donors and sperm donors are not patients. They are people with healthy fertility. Healthy women are put on powerful medications for which they have no medical need in exchange for money. Sperm donors too are offered financial incentives to sell their biological children. While both may be offered anonymity, the advances in DNA cannot hide the truth of the genetic origins of the donor conceived person. The policies around these processes take little interest in the health of fertile young women and certainly seem to ignore the consideration of the rights of the child conceived in this manner who may long to know at least their medical history. There is much harm being done and medicine and our policies need to take into account this side of the story.

9 *Scholarly Community Encyclopedia*, “Genealogical Bewilderment,” last updated November 22, 2022, <https://www.encyclopedia.pub/entry/35779>.

10 Steve LeBlanc, “A Former Harvard Professor Is Accused of Using His Sperm to Secretly Impregnate a Pa-

tient,” Associated Press, December 13, 2023, <https://www.apnews.com/article/harvard-fertility-doctor-law-suit-376318aa4dfffb53bb52f1456c817bdf>.

11 Emily McGarvey, “Sperm Donor Who Fathered 550 Children Ordered to Stop,” BBC News, April 28, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65429936>.

12 Ivana Saric, “Colorado Becomes First State to Ban Anonymous Sperm and Egg Donations,” Axios, June 1, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/06/01/colorado-ban-anonymous-sperm-egg-donation>.