

## An Experience of Egg Sharing in the UK

### Introduction

About 3 years ago in 2006, my husband and I started out on our egg donation journey and I had the good fortune of being able to talk to some existing members of the Donor Conception Network about their experiences of egg donation. They were enormously kind and honest and helped me with some of the emotional issues that I wanted to explore. However, at the time there was little information available about the *practicalities* of egg donation and the many different aspects to consider. I found the process, at times, quite daunting and I have written the following piece to provide an insight into what to expect, for anyone considering egg sharing as a way of creating or expanding a family. It's a purely personal account and I've offered a few words of advice along the way which might make your journey a little smoother. If you are about to take your first steps on this path, you have my admiration and respect. Trying to conceive through egg donation is by no means an easy route to take, but ultimately it can be a defining and hugely uplifting experience.

### Our journey to Egg Donation

John and I met and married in our mid thirties. After a year of trying naturally, it became clear that we were going to need some help to start a family and after all the usual tests, we set off down the IVF path. We had 3 attempts at IVF and although we didn't realise it at the time, even from the outset, the likelihood of us being successful was very slim. The first 2 cycles produced just one viable embryo each and on the 3rd cycle my ovaries didn't respond at all and there were no eggs to collect. It was devastating, but after much soul searching and 3 years of trying in a variety of different ways to have our much hoped for baby, we accepted that our chances of having our own biological child were pretty remote. We finally decided that we were ready to try something that would improve our chances, rather than spend any more time chasing a dream that might never be fulfilled.

### Choosing Egg Share and Deciding on a Clinic

Recognising that egg donation was our best chance of success, we began by going through the HFEA list of fertility clinics in the UK and identified the clinics that offered egg donation services and which had a track record in this form of treatment. There weren't many at the time (2006) and our short list numbered about 8. I called each clinic and asked about waiting times, costs, their approach to egg donation (overseas treatment with partner clinics, egg sharing, active donor recruitment etc.) and also to get a feel for the way they worked.

There are lots of different paths to finding a donor, each valid. We chose to egg share as the waiting times were relatively short (months rather than years) and we liked the idea of supporting another couple receiving fertility treatment at the same time. It also meant that our child would be able to gain access to details about the donor in the future if he or she wished. This felt like a good combination of factors for us. A couple that chooses to donate, receives standard IVF treatment (at a reduced cost) and then shares the eggs collected with the recipient couple. Somehow it feels like a bit of a team effort, both couples aiming for the same goal and each helping the other to get there. There are some limitations with this arrangement too, the most obvious being that as you are sharing eggs, you're likely to receive less than you would if you work with a single, direct donor and this reduces the number of attempts that may be possible.

From initial enquiries we were told that it was possible to find an egg share donor within 6 - 18 months, so we made the decision to get started. We chose a group of clinics with active egg sharing programmes, experienced egg share coordinators, short waiting lists (6 – 9 months at the time) and with facilities that were within striking distance for us geographically. We hedged our bets, signed up to 2 different waiting lists and then .... well... waited!.

### Waiting Lists and Matches

In an egg share situation, the aim is to match the basic physical characteristics of the donor and recipient (height, build, complexion, blood group, hair colour and eye colour). However, the reality is that you're unlikely to get a complete match with all the characteristics used, and you need to be happy to accept this if you opt for egg sharing. You also need to be prepared for a whole range of potential delays and disappointments – everything from the donor pulling out at the last minute to not enough eggs being produced to share.

It's a really good idea to get a clear idea of all these possible hiccups at the very beginning and also to discuss your priorities for matching with a donor. Hair colour, for example, might be really important for you if you're a red head. In our case, we realised some months into the process that the clinic's main objective was to match blood type first, then consider physical characteristics second. As a result, we were initially offered some pretty unmatched matches! as both myself and my husband have less common blood groups. Everyone's different, but for me it was really important that the donor bore some physical resemblance to me. Once we'd clarified that this was the main issue for us

rather than blood group (we had already decided to be open with our child about their genetic origins), we received a closer match and took the plunge!.

### Choosing a Donor

From the point at which we were registered on the waiting list to our final decision to go ahead it took about 8 months. It wasn't the long wait that we had originally expected and in some ways we were unprepared for how quickly a potential match would be found. I would advise being ready for the unexpected!.

We had steeled ourselves for up to a year of waiting and after about 4 or 5 months, I called one of the clinics on impulse just before Christmas to see where we were on the list. Out of the blue, the egg share co-ordinator said that they had a donor ready to start their cycle and that the first recipient had dropped out and we were a good alternative match. I nearly fell over when she said they were just about to close the office for the Christmas break and could we let them know our decision by midday!! I was sitting in a car outside Debenhams completely dumbstruck!. Perhaps there are plenty of people that would feel that this was a complete miracle and say yes on the spot, but it was just too overwhelming for us to act on at such short notice.

As time went on it was clear that this kind of approach was not unusual from the clinics that we were working with and I found this unpredictability very hard to deal with at times. If I were to go through the process again, I would try to get a good understanding of how the egg share co-ordinators make their matches, otherwise it can sometimes feel like you're caught up in an arbitrary process, where you don't know what the rules are.

It's an incredibly vulnerable position to be in when you're on the end of a phone, talking to a person that might hold the key to your future potential family life. I often felt that there was an expectation that we should be ready to accept any match and this put us under pressure to say yes. But I would recommend that you take the decision to go ahead when you are ready and completely comfortable that this is the right match for you. After all, this is *your* life and the future life of *your* child.

In the end our choice just seemed to fall into place. The donor wasn't an exact match to me physically or with blood type, but oddly enough she has characteristics that are similar to my Mum. This seemed to make the decision feel right and we said YES!!.

3 years on from that strange and beautiful moment, we have a gorgeous daughter, who is our heart and soul. Writing this piece I have been reminded of how far we have come and I'm proud that we've weathered the storms and been lucky enough to create our wonderful family. Even with all the challenges along the way, I cannot imagine it being any other way, nor would I wish for it to be so for a moment.

Anne

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