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Exploring the Experience of Known Egg Donation

By Nina M. Martin

Introduction

Known egg donation is an increasingly common form of treatment for women who cannot produce their own eggs, yet have a friend or family member who is willing to donate directly to them. However, a lack of research in the area has meant that, until now, there was no evidence about the experience for those directly involved. This study, undertaken as part of the author's PhD research at the University of Huddersfield, explores the experience of known egg donation and provides those embarking on the treatment with information regarding what to expect throughout the process.

Participants

Initially, four women who had received eggs from either a sister or a close friend were recruited via an advertisement placed in the Daisy Network newsletter in early 2004. The partners of three of these women, along with three of their donors, also agreed to take part in the study. Within these families, two couples had a child/ren as a result of the donation, one couple had two adopted children and the fourth couple was about to embark on adoption. Participants took part in in-depth interviews that explored the following topics: the donor-recipient relationship, partner/family relationships, telling the child, relationships with the child, relationships with (both donors' and recipients') existing children, and the experience of counselling. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a version of thematic analysis. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Findings

The findings of the research indicate the central importance in known egg donation of the relationships between all those involved. The success, or otherwise, of this form of family building rests upon how these relationships are negotiated, not only throughout the treatment process but also in the longer-term. The psychosocial issues identified within the study for those considering embarking on known egg donation are highlighted below.

Existing Relationships

The close personal relationship which exists between donor and recipient provides the background and context in which known egg donation takes place. A number of factors may influence the recipient couple's decision to use a known donor. According to Ben (the partner of one recipient), for example, knowledge of the donor's personal history, along with an awareness of her social and genetic background, is reassuring for the recipient couple:

...if you can find someone who will erm donate the eggs directly to you then there are big benefits, you, you know exactly where the eggs are coming from and you know who the, the, the donor is...

In addition, the donor's motivations to donate her eggs directly to the recipient couple and her perception of her relationship to her eggs may impact upon future

relationships. One donor, Hayley, indicates that she had “a responsible relationship” to her egg before the donation and, following the donation, this relationship extended to a feeling of responsibility towards the child, which could be compromised if the donation had been made to an anonymous recipient:

...I would hope and know [by donating to a known recipient] that whatever I was partly creating it will have a good upbringing and a happy one erm unknown I wouldn't know and I really, I would, I would worry erm that I did something to make someone unhappy, not that it's my er, that I, it's my fault it's there and that person's so unhappy and I wouldn't like to be responsible for that...

Those planning on known egg donation therefore need to consider and discuss their existing relationships and how these might be affected by the donation, as well as new relationships that may be created. The relationship between donor and recipient and between donor and child, and how these relationships will impact on the wider family, are key psychosocial issues here.

Changes in Relationships

During known donation, the partners of both donor and recipient find themselves on the periphery of the women's relationship. Their experience is largely one of being marginalised; they are marginal to the donation decision as one agreed between the two women and provide a supporting role 'only' to their partner throughout the process. David, the partner of one recipient, states:

...there's a lot of concentration on the woman [throughout known egg donation] and the bloke's just playing, you know, does his little bit, his little donation and then it's just support really...

Those undergoing known donation therefore, need to acknowledge the crucial importance of the male role and the women need to involve their partners throughout the process wherever possible, particularly in clinic appointments and counselling sessions. It is important to note here that the relationships of all those involved in the donation may change whatever the outcome. Following the donation, both donors and recipients need to consider the potential for either a closer or a more distant relationship. Whether the donor is a friend or family member is crucial as participants in the present study suggest that where the donor is a relative, the chances of the donor-recipient relationship surviving in the long-term is increased. The numerous possible sources of tension within the relationship should be acknowledged and explored when they arise, whether or not the donation results in the birth of a child. Ongoing communication is vital to promote a more successful donor-recipient relationship.

Both recipient couple and donor couple must be prepared for changes within their respective relationships to occur as a result of the donation. For the recipient couple, this may intensify any pre-existing tensions within their relationship. Therefore, they need to carefully consider at all stages during the process whether known donation is the most appropriate option for them. It is important that the donor couple explore together each partner's potential desire for another child, as any disparity between their views may have implications for the future of their relationship should the donation go ahead. For example, if the donor couple are not planning on having a family at the time of the donation, then donating eggs may not be an issue. Jackie (a donor) states:

...it didn't affect us at all [...] we were not planning on having any children at that particular time and we never went on to have children so, no, it wasn't, I think it was all talked about, it was fine...

However, Jackie also suggests that if she and her partner had wanted to have a family following the donation, then donating her eggs may have been a problem. The nature of the donor's relationship with the recipient's partner and the implications of a possibly closer relationship, and what this may mean for both donor and recipient's partner individually, and their relationship together, should be subject to continual negotiation throughout the donation process.

Creating New Relationships

Following donation resulting in the birth of a child, new relationships are created. The nature of these relationships is determined by the importance placed on the genetic, gestational, social, familial and biological links by the recipient and the donor. Defining and maintaining relationship boundaries were considered by the research participants as equally important. With regard to the recipients' relationship with the child, participants in the study emphasised the importance of the gestational link in known donation. Where the donor is related to the recipient, the shared genetic link is perceived as advantageous for both the recipient and her partner due to the indirect genetic connection between recipient and child, as one recipient, Mary, suggests:

...they [the children] still are genetically related to me, you know, in that erm...you know, they've got the same, they've got the same grandparents [as her first child], and that, you know, that sort of thing...

Consequently, any possible physical resemblance between the child and the donor is more likely to be viewed positively by the recipient when she is related to the donor, than when she is unrelated, due to the familial likeness. With regard to disclosure, recipient and donor may have conflicting views. Any conflicts here need to be discussed by all parties from the outset in order that any changes which do occur can be negotiated.

Participants reported that the donor's relationship with the child is managed in different ways by the donor, the recipient couple, and the child. For the donor, maintaining boundaries in her relationship with the child is of paramount concern and therefore her role in the child's life should be clearly defined, regardless of whether she is a friend or family member. When the donor is related to the recipient, her role will be pre-defined (e.g. as an aunt) yet more complex to manage due to the existence of two possible genetic relationships with the child (e.g. as both an aunt and as genetic mother). As Hayley indicates, the donor may endeavour to manage her genetic link with the child by limiting contact or by regarding the child as "special" and therefore underplaying the existence of the genetic link:

...I don't remember any of my Godchildren's birthdays, or my sister's children's birthdays, I, every month I'm looking at my birthday list, so she's just one of the rest, she's not sticking out as anything special erm apart from being a bit special...

Similarly, the recipient couple emphasise the donor's social link with the child due to concerns surrounding the significance of the genetic link. According to study participants, where the child is aware of his/her genetic origins, and relationship boundaries have been defined for the child, the child is more able to manage this relationship successfully. However, at the same time, where the child is concerned, an awareness of the genetic link may introduce ambiguity into his/her relationship with the donor.

Conclusion

This study raises a number of psychosocial issues that should be considered by both the recipient couple and donor couple before, during and after the donation process. The psychosocial issues identified are embedded within the relationships between all those involved, beginning with the donor-recipient relationship and including: both donor couple and recipient couple relationships, the donor's relationship with the recipient's partner, relationships with existing children (both donor's and recipient's) and their relationship with the potential child. Initially, these issues may be explored with a specialist counsellor. However, expertise in defining and managing these relationships in the longer-term will come from the families themselves, who may be encouraged to share their experiences and expertise with others who may decide to pursue known egg donation in the future.

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