*Human Fertility* (2002) **5**, 6–12

# Lessons from a recent adoption study to identify some of the service needs of, and issues for, donor offspring wanting to know about their donors

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**This paper draws on some of the major findings of a recent large-scale study of over 400 adult adopted people, who either searched for origins information or were sought out by birth relatives, to identify the potential profile of donor offspring seeking origins information. It is predicted that more women than men will search, that people who search will be in their twenties or older, and that the age at which searching begins may be delayed by the effects of the social stigma attached to gamete donation and by the greater likelihood of accidental disclosure in adulthood resulting from the higher incidence of secrecy about donor assisted conception. Two of the single triggers for adopted people to begin searching (as opposed to multiple triggers) – becoming a parent and the death of adoptive parents – may also be among the triggers for donor offspring to begin searching. The search may be complicated further when undertaken after accidental disclosure. Finally, it is argued that some donor offspring will experience a normative urge for identity completion and seeking relationships similar to that experienced by adopted people. This urge may stem from the fact that some donor offspring attach an identity to their donor that extends beyond needing factual details about their physical characteristics (though not necessarily a desire to establish a relationship). Some donor offspring are likely to encounter a desire for face-to-face contact, regardless of whether a face-to-face meeting was the original intention. The need for services to help donor offspring, donors, family members and others affected by the situation is identified.**

This article compares some of the research findings of the experiences of more than 400 adult adopted people in contact with The Children's Society, who either searched for origins information (394) or were sought out by birth relatives (79) (Howe and Feast, 2000), with the experiences of people conceived through the use of donor assisted reproduction treatments, as documented in biographical accounts and in two international empirical studies (Cordray, 1999; Turner and Coyle, 2000). The body of knowledge about donor offspring's views about searching for origins information is very small and the sources used represent a substantial part of the evidence that is currently available.

From the comparison, this article seeks to identify the potential features of donor offspring who may choose to search for further information about their genetic origins. It also identifies areas that warrant further attention from professionals and indicates the need for specialist services.

Although there are clear differences between adoption and donor assisted conception, it is the similarities that are of interest in this article, namely, that both adopted people and donor offspring are brought up in families formed as a result of professional intervention, with the legal sanction of the state (adoption agencies and licensed assisted conception centres), and in which there is no genetic relationship to one or both parents. The study of Howe and Feast (2000) of adopted people who have searched for information about their birth family is the largest and most recent in the UK. Most of the respondents were adopted in the 1960s and 1970s and were placed with adoptive families in early infancy with the legal consent of their birth parent or parents, rather than when older and as a result of coming through the care system, as would be the case with people adopted more recently. Therefore, the study of Howe and Feast (2000) offers the closest research that there is to date from which to speculate about the profile and needs of adult donor offspring who might search for information about their genetic origins.

This article looks for points of similarity of experience in the accounts of adopted people and donor offspring. Given the limited information available, it does not seek to quantify these similarities. It makes extensive use of quotes to illustrate each section before moving into discussion. The conclusions of the article are therefore necessarily speculative.

In the UK, the *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990* sets out the relevant legal requirements regarding donor offspring. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) is the regulatory body that licenses medically assisted reproduction treatments and administers the Register of Information of donors and of births after the use of donated gametes. The regulations for the use of the Register of Information are not yet in place, although a Department of Health public consultation about their content is anticipated imminently. The Register will be open for enquiries from 2008, that is, the date at which donor offspring conceived after 1 August 1991 have reached their sixteenth birthday. (For more information on the operation of the Register and the circumstances under which enquiries can be made see the *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990*, Section 31). It is therefore timely to anticipate the profile of the donor offspring who will search for their genetic parents, with a view to informing the development of services to assist them in their searches.


1464-7273/2002

## Which adopted people were most likely to search?

It is now thought to be more common than not for adult adopted people to search for their birth parents and the number of people who search has grown as openness about adoption has increased (Sobol and Cardiff, 1983; Howe and Feast, 2000). It is also increasingly clear that adopted people may think about their birth parents and contemplate searching for a long time before starting their search, and that some will never take action (Howe and Feast, 2000). There are some characteristics that have been found consistently and which are of interest here. (i) More women than men search (this study and others estimate the ratio at approximately 2:1) (Gonyo and Watson, 1988; Pacheco and Eme, 1993). Possible reasons for the apparent gender difference are that:

- women mature emotionally at a younger age than do men
- women settle with their life partner at a younger age than do men
- women have their first child earlier than do men
- women tend to be more interested in identity and relationship issues (Sachdev, 1992)

Given that these are characteristics of the wider population, it is likely that a similar gender difference will arise among donor offspring who search for their genetic parents. (ii) Most adopted people in the study of Howe and Feast (2000) were in their mid- to late twenties or older, and the women were on average 2 to 3 years younger than the men. These findings were explained by the following:

- there seems to be a long lead-in time during which people contemplate searching before taking action
- many people said that they needed emotional and personal security before embarking on their search
- many people said that they needed enough time and money to cope with the search and its consequences
- searching typically began only when the perceived balance between expectation of gain, drive to seek and fear of rejection allowed

The words of two adopted people (female and male, respectively) illustrate this point well:

'I was thinking the other day, I'd actually like to push it a bit further now, especially now I've got Lewis and I've sorted myself out. I'm a lot straighter… At those times [when I first got the information] I couldn't deal with any more upset… whereas now I'm fairly happy with my life as it is now, I can deal with it if she said, "I don't want to know you" or if she wasn't alive any more.'

'I started my search when I was 34… I nearly did it when I was a teenager, 16, 17, got very close to it… but I'm glad I didn't really, because I wouldn't have been able to handle it then… Then every year after Christmas and my birthday I thought about doing it – and it took another 20 years to do it!' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

Turning to accounts from donor offspring, the following woman also delayed her search. Although she found out about her conception at the age of 19, she waited until her family of four children was complete before searching:

'Having my children made me want to know more about the man who fathered me.' (Donor Conception Support Group, 1998)

Another account indicates that the person needed to wait until she saw it as her right:

'Initially, I felt the donor's rights must somehow supersede my own… it seemed as if it would be ungrateful of me to demand his identity without his consent…' (Leslie, 1997)

## What triggered the search?

As with some earlier studies (Triseliotis, 1973; March, 1995; Feast *et al*., 1998), the work of Howe and Feast (2000) indicates that there were often combinations of reasons that led to searching, including long-standing curiosity and the need for more background personal information. Among the single triggers that were identified, two in particular were to be found in both the study of Howe and Feast (2000) and in the accounts from donor offspring: starting a family and death of adopted parents.

### *Pregnancy, birth of a child or adoption of a child*

Searching may be triggered, for example, by a health professional requesting specific medical information, which is either not available or which otherwise prompts the realization that the adopted person or donor offspring does not have a full enough history to satisfy his or her own needs. This point is illustrated by the following two accounts from an adopted person and a donor offspring, respectively:

'When I became pregnant with my first daughter my attitude changed, partly due to all the medical questions I was asked to which I did not have the answers.' (Feast *et al*., 1998)

'Every time I presented to the antenatal clinic for the first time (I have 3 children) I would be asked about my medical history. As I answered questions… I realised, perhaps really realised for the first time, that I only knew half of my genetic inheritance.' (Turner, 1999)

### *Death of adoptive parent/s*

In the study of Howe and Feast (2000), adopted people who delayed searching until their adoptive parent or parents had died said that they did so primarily to protect their adoptive parents from upset (see also Haimes and Timms, 1985; Sachdev, 1992). This reason was given even though 70% of the respondents had always known that they were adopted, less than a third were told after the age of 6 and only 3% had never been told as children. Many expressed sadness that it could not have been different, as indicated by the following two accounts from adopted women:

'I wish in my heart that my adoptive parents could be here now so that I could give them a hug and tell them that I love them so much and that my searching out my birth mother has made no difference to the way I feel for them.' (Feast *et al*., 1998)

'Adoption was not talked about at all. I sensed my parents just didn't want to talk about it at all. They were just being protective towards me…' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

Therefore, the same decision might be made by donor offspring who have known about the circumstances of their conception for a long time. Even among those who do not learn the

truth about their origins until after their parents' death, there is evidence to indicate that similar feelings of sadness prevail:

'.....I was able to see that he [her father] truly did love me. I feel that he was a victim also. He didn't know how to act around me. I have come to feel sorry for the situation he was in.'

(Turner and Coyle, 2000)

However, just as with some 'secret' adoptions in the past, disclosure (whether accidental or deliberate) after the death of social parents may instead result in feelings in the donor offspring of anger, resentment or betrayal about the perceived deception, as shown by the following account:

'I have been cheated out of a proper family and created as a second class citizen, illegitimate and with no right to any information about my genealogical roots or family medical history.' (Whipp, 1998)

## What did adopted people hope to gain from the search and what needs were they hoping to have met?

Baran and Pannor (1990) suggested that: 'The adoptive family exists in the child's real world. In the fantasy world are the birthparents, seen alternately as good and terrible'. The psychological task of the adopted person (with or without the help of their adoptive parents) is to integrate those two worlds. The respondents in the study of Howe and Feast (2000) found that searching helped them to integrate their two families of origin and thereby better understand themselves by being able to construct more fully their own narratives within a social, personal and emotional context. Adopted people viewed their birth parents as people whom they wanted to know about, rather than simply as genetic vehicles (see also Sobol and Cardiff, 1983; Haimes and Timms, 1985; Kowal and Schilling, 1985; Campbell *et al*., 1991; Hollingsworth, 1998).

Howe and Feast (2000) developed a framework for analysing the reasons given for searching to try to understand more fully the experiences that the adopted people recounted. Respondents typically expressed their need to search in terms of roots, reasons and relationships. Howe and Feast (2000) categorized these as follows: (i) identity completion, including identity connections and roots, and self-worth and reasons for their adoption; (ii) seeking relationships.

### *Identity completion*

Identity completion was seen as the primary driving force for those who saw themselves as happy enough before searching but who nevertheless expressed a sense of feeling incomplete and different, as indicated by the following two accounts from adopted women:

'My parents were very loving… we always knew we were loved… it was when I was a teenager I became very aware of being adopted. Particularly not looking like anyone in my family. All my friends were saying "Oh, I wish I was adopted" and I was thinking, "I wish I wasn't, I wish I looked like somebody."' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

'I wanted to meet up for some information-type purposes – to see what I looked like, missing piece, that kind of thing. Curiosity and like completing the picture.' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

Thus, for some adopted people, the route to identity completion was primarily through finding out more information about physical traits and personality traits with a view to seeking connections with, for example, their own looks and mannerisms. This aspect is termed 'identity connections and roots' by Howe and Feast (2000).

For others, the route to identity completion came from knowing more about the reasons behind their adoption: why their birth parents 'gave them up', whether they were loved by their birth parents, how to explain their existence. Howe and Feast (2000) termed this aspect 'self-worth and reasons'.

'It [making contact] just makes you feel that you belong to something because I used to very much feel as I was growing up… like I'd just been plonked on the earth – a mystery – no past at all that you can relate to… so you feel isolated and cut off. I'm sure that's one of the reasons why wanting to find birth parents is so important because it makes you have a beginning, middle and end.'

(Howe and Feast, 2000)

'… I think everybody who is adopted, it always crosses their mind: "I wonder if that bit's like her, or I wonder if that bit's like her?"… I wanted to know what happened in that part of my life that nobody knew. Or just to ask the question, "Why did you have me adopted? Why didn't you struggle?"' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

The emerging voices of donor offspring indicate some similarities with those of adopted people with regard to identity connections and roots:

'I needed to know whose face I was looking at in the mirror – I needed to know who I was and how I came to be – it was a very primal and unrelenting force which propelled the search and it was inescapable and undeniable.' (Turner and Coyle, 2000)

'I would like to know what that missing fifty percent of my gene pool is like. I would, of course, also like to know whether there are hereditary illnesses to which I am prone. And on some level, most of all, I would like to meet an older man who looks like me.'

(Allen, 1997)

Similarities are also identified in relation to self-worth and reasons:

'I need to find the mystery man because this information is infinitely personal to me. It is linked to my personality and medical health and will explain the questions in my head and mend the hole in my heart…' (Donor Conception Support Group, 1999)

### *Seeking relationships*

The findings of Howe and Feast (2000) indicated that adopted people were more likely to be driven by the need to complete their identity than by a need to find new relationships, although a relationship was invariably formed with birth relatives once contact was made. Some adopted people were very clear that they were not seeking a relationship with their birth relatives:

'I was very much loved, very much wanted. I was given a great deal of love, encouraged to achieve what I could, but was never pushed to do something I really couldn't do.' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

Similar accounts are recorded elsewhere:

'I do not need a new mother – I've got a wonderful one of my own. I do not need a new family – mine is the best there is.'
(British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, 1997)

Donor offspring may also experience a need to search that is not driven by a need to seek out new relationships, as illustrated by the following account:

'I'm not looking for a father figure because I already have one. The man who raised me is my Dad as far as I'm concerned but it would be nice to know who gave me the gift of life. Until I find him, a part of me is missing.' (Donor Conception Support Group, 2000)

However, some adopted people in the study were clearly seeking new, possibly reparative, relationships, often out of a sense that such a relationship was missing in their present lives:

'I was going through a traumatic divorce… and I felt very much at the time like I needed to relate to somebody who was my blood, who might understand my thinking…' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

Again, evidence for this drive to search can be found among accounts from donor offspring. The following woman almost certainly had a potential relationship in her fantasy:

'I sometimes sit in coffee shops and gaze at men who would be old enough to be my father… I fantasise that the man sipping a short black… reading a paper is my father.'
(Donor Conception Support Group, 1997)

## Were the identified needs of adopted people met by their search?

Howe and Feast (2000) found that people commonly reported feelings of anxiety, nervousness and excitement accompanying the search process, together with a widespread hope that a successful search would improve their happiness.

Even though three-quarters of the adopted people who searched found the intensity of feelings engendered difficult to manage, most said the reunion had been a positive experience whether or not the contact with birth relatives was short lived and difficult or comfortable and long lasting. Most of those who started searching went on to seek face-to-face contact as well as information.

More than 80% said that the contact had answered important questions about their origins and background. Many reported an improved sense of identity and well-being as a result of the contact. People talked about feeling more complete as a person; they had found the missing bits of their story, as illustrated by the following two accounts from adopted women:

'… I feel I've gained. I've gained information that helped me make sense of my feelings. So, I mean I'm glad I've done it and I'm really glad that I found her. But it's more to do with how it's affected me personally, internally, than a relationship with her.'
(Howe and Feast, 2000)

'Well, it's changed my personality. I'm more laid back now. I'm not so frustrated… because all the questions that were unanswered as a child and teenager and right up until my late thirties, things that have been going on in my mind, the questions that I've wanted to ask – it's all been answered now… I'm at ease; I feel more at ease within myself for knowing.' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

The same was true even when the adopted person met with rejection, as did the following man:

'It was hard work emotionally whilst it was going on, it was certainly hard work when the rejection came… but I don't regret it, if anything it's filled in a lot of blanks and I know a lot more about me…' (Howe and Feast, 2000)

The opportunities for searching are, as yet, more limited for donor offspring and there are no dedicated professional services to assist in the search. There is therefore an extremely small amount of written material about the experience of face-to-face contact. The material that is available shows similarities between the experiences of adopted people and those of donor offspring:

'I think that I have been extremely fortunate to meet my biological father… I now have information which allows me to feel complete. I no longer have all those unanswered questions in my head about who I am.' (Donor Conception Support Group, 1999)

## Discussion

Among donor offspring who search for their genetic parents a gender bias similar to that seen among adopted people who search for their birth parents may be expected to emerge. There is some evidence to support this contention from the profile of clients currently seeking information and counselling in infertility matters, whereby it is women who take primary interest in seeking such non-medical help (Monach, 1993; Eugster and Vingerhoets, 1999). Given that fewer men come forward for counselling, it might be expected that fathers will be less likely to encourage their donor offspring sons to seek help and will offer fewer role models as users of counselling and information services.

The limited research available to date about donor offspring who search for information about their donors indicates that there will be a preponderance of women (Cordray, 1999; Turner and Coyne, 2000), although only as the numbers increase will it be possible to determine any patterns among those who search.

It is difficult to know how much the gender balance will be affected by the fact that most donors who will be sought will be men, that is sperm donors, whereas most birth parents who are sought after adoption are women, that is birth mothers. In the study of Howe and Feast (2000) adopted people were most interested in finding out about their birth mothers, followed by interest in their birth relatives (especially siblings) and interest in birth fathers was ranked third. So will donor offspring show less interest in searching when men (sperm donors) are involved? Will there be more interest in searching for female donors than for male donors? Will there be a gender difference in the profiles of those seeking male donors and those seeking female donors? Or will the dominant impetus be the desire to search for a genetic parent regardless of gender?

The age at which donor offspring will start to search may be more difficult to anticipate. There are likely to be greater

numbers of donor offspring starting to search after accidental disclosure in adulthood given the higher degree of secrecy practised in these families (Golombok *et al*., 1995, 1996; Snowden and Snowden, 1998; McWhinnie, 2000). The greater social stigma attached to donor insemination and egg donation than to adoption (Haimes, 1988; Daniels and Taylor, 1993) may further delay the age at which the search is commenced. Many donor offspring who have written of their experiences in adulthood only 'found out' and 'came out' in their 30s and 40s (Cordray, 1999; Turner and Coyle, 2000). Will the age profile among donor offspring who have known of the nature of their conception since childhood be similar to that among adopted searchers who have known of their background since childhood? Or will the climate of secrecy and stigma also delay the search for this group of donor offspring?

When the trigger for the search is becoming a parent, the parallel experiences between adopted people and donor offspring indicate that it is not just the answers to questions that prompted the search but also the person's changing relationship with their adopted or donor offspring status. There may be some rethinking of the relationship between heredity and environment, even when the circumstances of conception have been known about for some time. As further evidence from donor offspring emerges, it will be important to analyse this more fully to increase understanding of this area.

When the trigger for the search is the death of adoptive parents, again it is likely that adopted people who delay their search until this point are likely to have known about their adoptive status for some time. Therefore, the triggers may be cumulative and provide stepping-stones along the continuum towards searching rather than the catapult that accidental disclosure can unleash. Greater numbers of donor offspring (at least initially) will embark on a search after a much shorter period of awareness about their genetic status. Many donor offspring will be actively managing the impact of the disclosure alongside the impact of the searching, and this could affect the process. Managing the impact of disclosure at the same time as a life-changing event, such as becoming a parent or losing a parent, will have repercussions and may generate specific support needs.

The profiles of donor offspring who form the early group of searchers may match more closely those of adopted people who searched at a time when secrecy in adoption was still the norm. In a study of this group of adopted people, Triseliotis (1973) found that there were often a number of chronic stressors in their lives, including difficulties in their adoptive families. Furthermore, some searchers hoped that contact with birth relatives would ease that stress. Howe and Feast (2000) report a changed picture. Although half of the adopted people who searched for birth parents reported some difficulties in their adoptive experience, the problems were not necessarily severe, and many searchers (53%) reported adoptive experiences that were secure and stable.

As more adopted people have come forward to search, research indicates that searching can stem from normative as well as pathological desires: an interest and curiosity in their birth parents as well as, or instead of, a need to repair relationships. It is becoming clearer that searching can represent for an individual a way to connect with his or her biological identity, to place him- or herself in a social context and to fill in his or her unique narrative framework in addition to, or instead of, neutralizing any feelings of loss and chronic emotional distress. This finding is important in relation to donor offspring who search for their genetic parents. It is possible that the early group of donor offspring who search for their genetic parents may have a disproportionate amount of chronic stressors in their family upbringing, as found in the early group of adopted people who searched for birth parents. However, it is also possible that this group of donor offspring may not have such chronic stressors, but may be seen as emotionally dysfunctional simply because they have chosen to search.

It might be assumed that the desire to search will be very different for donor offspring than it is for adopted people. Donor offspring will already have a genetic relationship with one of their (social) parents (unless both a donor egg and donor sperm were used in their conception), they will not have spent any time with birth parents, and they will almost certainly have been carried by their (social) mother throughout pregnancy and birth. Although it might be assumed that they will therefore have less sense of 'difference' in terms of physical and personality traits and less desire to know about the motivation of their donor, the quotes illustrate that this is not necessarily the case. Possibly even more surprising, there are also some donor offspring whose sense of self-worth is adversely affected by their lack of knowledge about the donor, including the donor's reasons for donating.

It has been argued that adopted people have to cope with a particular experience of abandonment and rejection by their birth parents and that there is no parallel experience for donor offspring (Deech, 1998; Shenfield, 1999), thus making comparisons between the two groups invalid. It is not accepted that donor offspring might have a need for a relationship with, or knowledge about, the supplier of their genetic material if the supplier was a donor rather than a birth parent.

There is indeed (usually) a genetic difference between adopted people and donor offspring. Adopted people share their family experience (the real world) with both adoptive parents and their genetic experience with neither. They share their genetic experience with their birth parents who are (usually) available to them only in their fantasy world. However, donor offspring share both family experience and genetic experience with one parent in the real world (unless they were conceived with donor egg and donor sperm) but with their non-genetic parent they share only their family experience (the real world). They share their genetic experience with their donor who is (usually) available to them only in their fantasy world.

It could be argued that the genetic bond with one (current) parent removes, or at least lessens, the need for information about, and contact with, the missing genetic parent, and that this gap is filled by the presence of the shared family experience with the non-genetic parent. This contention implies that donor offspring will not face the psychological task of integrating these two worlds because they will not experience their genetic dislocation in the same way that adopted people do, even when two donors are involved (as with offspring from donated embryos).

There is little research evidence about donor offspring's feelings towards their donors. However, the limited evidence to date indicates that the presumption of no relationship between donor and offspring (in either direction) may warrant revision.

In an international survey of donor offspring conducted by Cordray (1999), many respondents reported that they wanted to meet their donor and find out more about them. This finding is in agreement with that of Turner and Coyle (2000). For some donor offspring, as illustrated below, the shared family experience does not appear to replace the need for knowledge about, and contact with, the person who supplied half of their genetic material, and presumably the need to undertake the psychological work of integrating that knowledge and experience into their real world:

> 'I'd like to know about the donor's health… I'd like to 'see' the personality traits I've inherited… I'd like to know what the donor does for a living, what conflicts he's had, how he's resolved them; what issues he struggles with…' (Turner and Coyle, 2000)

For some donor offspring, the relinquishment of sperm or egg may indeed create a sense of relationship and meaning to them as offspring. Furthermore, it may engender similar feelings of abandonment to those experienced by adopted people as an apparent result of relinquishment by a birth mother at or shortly after birth.

The stage at which the relinquishment happens (that is, preconception or after birth) may carry less significance for the offspring than the fact that the relinquishment has been made by a genetic parent, someone who has an identity beyond their constituent body parts, for example height and weight. At what stage do human beings have a sense that they are formed? What significance do humans attach to their biographical and other heritage? If a donor offspring has a keen interest in, and sense of attachment to, their forebears in general, why should it be assumed that they will feel detached from the forebears 'attached' to the sperm or egg from which they were conceived, regardless of their subsequent social parenting and family experience? The meaning that the provider attaches to the material he or she provides may be different from the meaning of the material for the recipient adult and (separately) for the resulting person. The following account illustrates the importance of listening to donor offspring:

> 'If DI is an honourable way to conceive a child, why should the person who makes this possible be afforded the status of anonymity when every other act of reproduction entails responsibility for the children created? Even 'deadbeat dads' and promiscuous men who father children through random sex are held responsible to their offspring.' (Turner and Coyle, 2000)

For this man, the need to know more about his donor and the indignation at being denied access to information held in professional records is affecting his ability to get on with his life and to 'know' himself fully.

Little is known about the relative importance of nature and nurture on the self-system of individuals and the unravelling world of genetics can serve to confuse this issue further. Individuals who know their genetic suppliers may have less urgency in their need to understand the heredity–environment riddle at a personal level than those who do not. It is important to consider whether lack of access to information about, and contact with, the narrative about a person's genetic parent, whether through adoption, donor assisted conception or another triangle, may paradoxically heighten a pre-existing sense of loss or incomplete identity for that individual.

For the person concerned, simply learning about his or her origins and the nature of his or her conception may not be sufficient to guarantee a satisfactory level of understanding and integration. Knowing the facts in detail may influence understanding; but understanding is a dynamic concept and a person's relationship to understanding his or her origins and status (whether an adopted person or a donor offspring) is likely to need to be refined and renegotiated continually over a lifetime. This may involve seeking additional factual information or face-to-face contact at different times and stages, as determined necessary by the person. In the study of Howe and Feast (2000), many adopted people found it difficult to stop short of face-to-face contact once the search was underway, even when face-to-face contact had never been the intended outcome.

Donor offspring who search for their genetic parents will almost certainly need the sort of services that are now recognized as crucial in post-adoption work, not least because of the difficult knowledge that may accrue about the circumstances of the donation, the motivation of the donor and the potential complexities in meeting the donor and other biological relatives, including the potentially large numbers of half-siblings. The lack of research and practice experience in this area means that, initially, services will need to draw heavily on the experience of adoption agencies.

It is likely that there will be a variety of experiences among donor offspring in relation to searching, from those who never feel the need to search to those who do so with vigour from the earliest opportunity. Each case needs to be afforded validity. Professionals can only seek to offer appropriate services; they must not presume to be expert in another person's life and that means listening carefully to what the donor offspring identify as their reality, experience and need, and responding to it accordingly.

## Conclusion

This article has compared some of the major findings of a recent large-scale study of more than 400 adult adopted people, who either searched for origins information or were sought out by birth relatives, with the experiences of people conceived through the use of donor assisted reproduction treatments, as documented in biographical accounts and in two international empirical studies (Cordray, 1999; Turner and Coyle, 2000). The two studies on donor offspring represent a substantial part of the (limited) number of published studies that are currently available on the experiences of donor offspring.

From these reports it is predicted that, among donor offspring, more women than men are likely to search for information about their donors and that those who search will be in their twenties or older, even when they have known about the details of their conception throughout their conscious memory. It is possible that the age at which searching begins will be delayed further by the effect of both the social stigma attached to gamete donation and the higher incidence of secrecy in these families, and hence the likelihood of disclosure occurring in adulthood.

For adopted people, two of the single triggers that prompted searching (as distinct from the more common multiple reason triggers) were becoming a parent and the death of adoptive

parents. These may also be triggers for donor offspring, but the situation may be complicated further when such events trigger disclosure of genetic identity for the first time.

Finally, professionals need to consider the possibility that some donor offspring will experience a normative urge for identity completion and seeking relationships, similar to that experienced by adopted people. This urge will stem from the fact that some donor offspring attach an identity to their donor that extends beyond the need for factual details about their physical characteristics (though not necessarily a desire to establish a relationship). If the needs of donor offspring are similar to those of adopted people, it is likely that a desire for face-to-face contact will result from an initial desire to search, regardless of whether face-to-face contact was the original intention. The implications for access to identifying information are clear.

The need for services staffed by professionals with experience of helping people to manage search and reunion has been identified. Such services are likely to be needed for all those affected, including donor offspring, donors and associated family members.

Although there are important differences between adoption and donor assisted conception, this article has indicated that it can be useful to draw on the experiences of adoption. Only a small part the findings of Howe and Feast (2000) have been used here, and more findings from that study are to be published shortly. Thus, further comparative work should be conducted.

The last word on the need for donor offspring to know about their genetic parents is given to two donor-conceived boys, aged nine and six, talking to their mother:

Mother: 'If you could, what would you like to ask the donor?'

Nine-year-old son: 'Is he bald, and I just want to know what he looks like?'

Six-year-old son: 'Does he like doughnuts?'

(Donor Conception Support Group, 1997)

The author expresses particular thanks to Julia Feast and Eric Blyth for their comments on an earlier draft.

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