

# Sperm donor conception and disclosure to children: a 10-year retrospective follow-up study of parental attitudes in one French center for the study and preservation of eggs and sperm (CECOS)

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**Objective:** To evaluate the percentage of parents in one French center for the study and preservation of eggs and sperm who disclose their use of donated spermatozoa to their children.

**Design:** A questionnaire survey of couples who had a child using donated spermatozoa.

**Setting:** University hospital laboratory.

**Patient(s):** One hundred five couples.

**Intervention(s):** Questionnaire sent by mail.

**Main Outcome Measure(s):** The percentage of parents who disclose their use of donated spermatozoa to their child.

**Result(s):** Among the 157 questionnaires sent, 105 couples answered, which corresponded to 138 children. There were 40 (38%) couples who had already disclosed the donor origin to their child and 65 (62%) who had not. Of the 40 couples who disclosed the donor origin, 37 (93%) had intended to do so before making use of assisted reproductive techniques (ART), but two (5%) had not wanted to do so before ART. Among the 65 couples who did not inform their child, 42 (65%) planned to inform their child soon, but 20 (31%) wanted to keep the sperm origin secret. Of the 20 couples who wanted to keep the origin secret, nine couples had told other persons about the gamete donation but had not informed their child and do not intend to inform their child in the future.

**Conclusion(s):** This first report about disclosure attitude in a large cohort of parents of donor-conceived offspring in France showed that most parents had already disclosed their use of donated spermatozoa to their children or intended to disclose it soon and had an attitude after birth consistent with their intentions prior to ART. (Fertil Steril® 2017;■:■-■. ©2017 by American Society for Reproductive Medicine.)

**Key Words:** Sperm donation, disclosure, offspring information, secret

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The practice of assisted reproductive techniques (ART) (1) using freshly donated spermatozoa has been known since the eighteenth century. ART with donated spermatozoa was developed in the 20th century thanks to the mastery of human spermatozoa freezing. In France, the first center for the study and preservation of eggs and sperm (centre d'étude et de conservation des oeufs et du sperme, or CECOS) was created in 1973 to supervise these practices with respect to three key principles: free, anonymous, and voluntary donations. The centers were designed to meet the reproductive needs of heterosexual couples consisting of a man and a woman. Thereafter, the three key principles were included in the first bioethics law of July 29, 1994, and these aspects remained unchanged in the revised bioethics laws of 2004 and 2011. The French bioethics law requires that all gamete recipients consent to ART using donated gametes in the presence of a judge or notary, to certify the filiation between the child to be born and his parents and to attest to the lack of filiation between the child and the donor. Nevertheless, the law says nothing about disclosure and does not impose anything on couples or medical teams about disclosure. Today, the 27 French CECOS centers constitute a network and are grouped into a French federation of centers with common practices. Since 1973, approximately 65,000 couples have undergone ART using donated spermatozoa, leading to approximately 50,000 births, corresponding to an average of 1,000 births per year.

In the 1970s, whether the use of donated spermatozoa would be disclosed to the child was not always discussed during the consultations between the CECOS team and the couples. Since the systematization of psychological interviews, this question is always raised with couples. Interviews with psychologists have been systematized since the 1980s. During these interviews, the two members of the couple may be questioned together or separately. Discussions are focused on the experience of infertility for each member of the couple and on how they have gone through their period of mourning for their fertility. Moreover, the level of information shared with others and the intentions of the couples to disclose their use of donated sperm to their child are always discussed. Therefore, the intentions of the patients to disclose or not their use of donated spermatozoa to their future child are systematically noted during the first consultations with the CECOS team. For practitioners across the CECOS network, it is clear that the proportion of couples who intend to disclose this information to their offspring has increased over the years, although no French prospective study has been published. The first data in this field were acquired from a study in which part of the cohort consisted of couples with a child born using ART with donated spermatozoa who wanted a second child (1). A questionnaire regarding information on the child was sent, and each member of the couples responded separately. One-half of the couples who answered had the intention to inform the child, and 30% did not plan to inform the child. A second study including 20 CECOS centers and 407 questionnaires from 201 couples, with questionnaires focused on the couples' intention to share the secret of conception, showed that 65% of couples had the intention to tell their children about their use of donated sperm (2). However,

beyond the intentions, we have very little data on the actual information that is communicated by the parents to their child after the child's birth.

We published a pilot study at our center (3) that focused on couples who had a child using ART with donated sperm and who clearly expressed their intention to inform their future child before the ART. For this first study, we did not call undecided couples or couples who intended to keep the donor origin secret during the first consultations with the CECOS team. Among 38 questionnaires sent after a first telephone agreement to participate to the study, 20 couples answered (52%). Among the 20 couples who answered, 14 couples (70%) had already disclosed the donor origin to their child, four had the intention to disclose the information in the near future, and two changed their opinion, expressing a desire to keep the details of the conception secret. This first study showed us that couples agreed to answer our questionnaire, that some couples changed their decision about disclosure after childbirth, and that support after birth is needed to help couples share information with their offspring. In the international literature about the matter of disclosure to offspring, the majority of European and international studies have shown that homo-/heterosexual couples and single women did not disclose their use of donated spermatozoa to their child at time of the survey. However, results vary according to the studies, countries, and type of recipients (heterosexual couples, homosexuals couples, or single women) (4–9). Over the recent decades, many studies have been conducted in countries where gamete donation follows rules that are different from those in France. In France, the specifications of sperm donation are that it is only available for heterosexual couples and that it is strictly anonymous. In this context, only two studies have attempted to evaluate the percentage of parents who disclosed the donor origin to their offspring, but the percentages were based on couples who answered the questionnaires, and there have been relatively low participation rates (1, 3). However, it seems that couples interviewed before ART are more open to disclosing the information than couples who already have a child (1).

We set up this study to evaluate the parents who had at least one child by sperm donation in our center and to determine the percentage of parents who disclose their use of donated spermatozoa to their child. Moreover, we intended to determine whether the parents' actions after childbirth were consistent with their intention before ART and if there was a consistency between disclosure to the child and disclosure to family or close friends. Couples were first contacted by phone, and a questionnaire was subsequently mailed to couples who agreed to participate in the study.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Target Population

We identified 317 births resulting from ART with donated spermatozoa from our CECOS center in Marseilles from 2002 to 2012. At the time of the consultations with the medical team, all couples gave their written informed consent to be contacted again after childbirth. We first called 317

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