

SESSION 4: DR. SHARON PETTLE, CONSULTANT CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, GREAT ORMOND STREET HOSPITAL AND HON SENIOR LECTURER AT INSTITUTE OF CHILD HEALTH = THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

Speaker	Transcript
S1	<p>Thank you very much Olivia. And to complete our journey through Opening the Register very elegantly, I would like to invite Sharon Pettle. So Sharon Pettle, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, The Great Ormond Street Hospital and Hon. Senior Lecturer at Institute of Child Health is now going to talk about her research with Donor Conceived Children, so I would just like you to take the stand right away.</p>
S2	<p>Okay, with a bit of research and a bit of not research actually, I think children speak very eloquently for themselves often if you give them a chance to do it. And I have included some drawings that have come from the group that I have run as part of the DC Network Annual Events which I think have created a space for children unlike anything that they have anywhere in the world but just as a set of context of where information comes from. The other drawing, (showed children's drawings on projector) that is a mum and dad family. This is a single mum family and the groups have included children from same sex couples, single mothers by choice and heterosexual couples, egg donation, embryo donation, donor insemination and all manner We meet every time with an issue we have not dealt with before. I think there were limited sources of information about what children donor offspring had to tell us. I think now that it has helped some extent by UK Donor Link but the sources of information were often from. Published Accounts from very small research studies, a recent study by email which some of you may know and then current sources from me which are the groups and some of the clinically experiences I have had. So, some of the earlier accounts said the offspring accepted this information equably. None found the information particularly traumatic though many were surprised. Let the offspring speak which many of you may be familiar with gave her all the different picture and it was often people told later in life who felt secrecy had had very negative consequences and the information about the donor which they had no access to what is fundamentally important to them.</p> <p>More recently, a study I did which included some offspring and a study done by</p>

Turner and Coil really confirmed that and took off the shock and the impact of secrecy and late telling on family relationships and the frustration that people experience when they are unable to access any more information about their origins or donor information . A very recent web based survey that came out earlier this year included 13 to 7 year old about 50% of that I think they are about 80 young people but they were mainly in America so there are all sorts of ways that any of you who may want to discount this can do so. We can say that they are not young enough, we can say they are not from the UK we can come up with all sort of reasons not to listen and I think we have to move from that and start listening and start listening hard.

The Children's Workshop as I said are not researched they have offered a space , a confidential space away from parents where children between 8 and 12 can raise issues, ask questions and share their feelings in a safe context. I feel it is an enormous privilege actually to be trusted by parents around such a delicate and sensitive issue. I think Janice and I would say that we have learned a lot to every six groups. From the 1st one, we learned not to do it again but the fact that we have now and there was just one last weekend so we are now talking nearly fifty children. A substantial number of them have come more than once, so we must be doing something right and that one of the uniform pieces of feedback we get from the children is that they have appreciated it and enjoyed is being in a group with other children with donor conception's common knowledge and common experience and they are out of the ordinary. They may have different experiences, they may have different views, they may have different opinions, but they in a group, that fundamentally understand. We have had boys and girls, and as I said the age range is from 8 and 12, They are young age and they are very old 12's and everything in between. And one of the ways that we have been encouraged, children to talk sometimes is getting them to draw their family and you have seen a couple of these already and there are lots of happy pictures. There are also some which are not quite so colorful. We talk about all the other people who are important to you as well, which is actually very important to some children who are in single mother by choice families because their sense of family can feel very small and so we are very mindful that family is a much wider concept. And I think not very much link with being said about any work with children who grow into adult. It is likely to have a ripple through a network of people far greater than one might anticipate. Now, what are the issues that these children raise? We have really interesting conversations about degrees of biological relatedness. It is a challenge to try and describe step-sibling relationship, half-sibling relationships and adoption as well as donor conception. There are many children who know the

number of half-siblings that they have connected with their donor and do not actually seem at the moment to be terribly fazed by having that. It might be 12 or 18 and at the moment they do not seem to be fazed by the likelihood that all these children are going to be within a very short age range, very small age range in relation to them, unlike the sorted conventional idea one has about siblings is that they are usually at least one year apart from you. And we had the experience of having two half siblings by donor in one of the groups which brought it right in the room and made it totally real for all the other children and they are fascinated to share their stories about how they found out many of the children cannot remember when they found out the conversations that they had with their mums and dads. Some children have found out relatively recently, like 6 or 7 or 8 and one of the things that they do like to talk about is how they talk about it with friends and one of these is they come into the room. How do they talk about if they got single mothers by choice or lesbian parents? And how do they decide about telling friends? And how do they think about its use of trust? So, complicated issues for small children, smallest children. They get fascinated by the history. They are really interested to know that a substantial number in this room could be donor conceived and they have just beginning to get the ahead around the fact that this has been going on for a lot longer than they thought. And most of them know quite well because they have been interested and had conversations with their parents that the Register exists, it will be something they can access, and that anonymity has now been abolished, and some of them are not very pleased about that, that it was not abolished before they were born - they want same access to that kind of information.

They are quite fascinated by technology, and there is sense of marvel sometimes about how donated sperm and eggs could possibly have been used to create them. And one of the things that overrides much of this is a real sense about how much they were wanted and how long adults waited wanting to create the family which includes them. But there are questions, and I picked out a couple of the drawings which I think illustrate this very clearly.

The issues that get raised about donors: What is the information that will be there and what they would like. And I think the group on Saturday generated about 35 questions which range from, "do you think he might like peanut butter" to "I really wish I knew what his principles were" - that was one of the older children. They can often remember if they get a little bit of information and make the connections between themselves. We started the group on Saturday with a whole load of pictures which they could choose, which they delight, or in some way connected with them, with "donor stuff" as we tend to call it. And one of the children picked up

a picture which was somebody reading and talked with the group about how he knew that his donor had been a librarian and he was really fascinated by books and it led to a very lively conversation about the ways in which children might be like or might not be like the person who donated the eggs or sperm, or in case of one of the children in the group, the embryo. The issue of half siblings absolutely fascinates all the children; and fantasies, we're talking children here, you know, who might the donor be? Famous footballers, amazing pop stars, all come up for grabs.

There is some anxiety around, on the other side too, where the donors could somehow find them if they did not want to be found. And whether they could trace donors or whether they can be in control of that. And I think some children are beginning to understand that whilst they have always been told that they would not ever have the chance of meeting their donor that there may be some donors who will come forward and are prepared to be identified. Children do talk about the idea of searching, finding, and meeting. I have not had one of them talk about wanting along an established relationship with somebody but the curiosity is clearly there. And we have had in the group children who have a donor who is known, whose identity is known in the family. And that has raised on the one hand some envy, and in one situation where the donor was actually involved in contact currently quite a different set of feelings from children who were like... Well... I am interested eventually to know but keep him away for now.

So, some children come up with questions, and I love this one, because here are the half siblings with their question marks and here is the donor who the child chose to write "dad". This is from a child who is not in a two-parent family, but raises some of the questions which of course we cannot possibly answer but this is a space where that could come out. Here is the donor at some distance, but again it is a single-mum family. But it is about children, who, they just simply asked, "draw your family, people you live with, people who are important". So it is what is in children's minds.

So, some questions: will the register be clearly publicized? Some of the things that have already been said about perturbing parents who have not shared the DC origins with their children or the donors and their families. If the register is not publicised, how are people going to know that it exists and that they can access it? It is inevitably going to tempt some young people who were not donor-conceived but whose experiences have raised the questions and it is inevitably going to bring the topic to the forefront for donors.

For the young people who know, it seems to me, that most of them are... have

been aware for a long time will continue to be aware through their teenage years that there are limitations on the information that is available for them. Maybe they have already got all the information they are ever going to have but I suspect there is a part of them that hopes there was a bit more, that if they contact the Register it will enrich the knowledge that they have. And of course there is always this possibility now that donors might be willing to be identified although their parents thought that he or she would remain anonymous.

We are in the realm of prediction, which is not an easy one to be in, and I think what is even we cannot predict but what is absolutely vital is that we gather information so that we can help others prepare, that we can help teenagers as they get older know what other people have experienced. We have to be prepared for the fact that some people might have been told very recently and/or precipitately before approaching the Register. I do not think we can know what the significance of actually approaching the Register might be for a teenager or young adults. They may well have grown up with this information always or not and that sense of identity that they have and sense of self may be supported or perturbed. They may be some way in which approaching the register becomes a particularly significant act in a young adult's life. And inevitably, I think there will be young people who are disappointed and frustrated by the lack of detail. And if that is something that people can stop thinking about now when getting information for people or have the option of getting more information, I think that will be very helpful.

So, there are various potential challenges facing the possibility of making contact where donors have agreed for families particularly where open communication was not in place and for young people who struggle with identity issues or whose approach to the Register means, that a hope for partnership actually has to dissolve. Okay, where do these families go for help? We have heard pretty much at the moment, there are many places for them to go. There are similarities with Post Adoption and I think particularly around searching but I think donor conception as a way of creating family is also quite different from adoption and I think that the world of post-adoption at the moment is really trying to grapple with late placements and some of the real difficulties that those children present and so local services are really not going to be in a position to respond. One of the things I discovered is that children or adults who are really struggling with donor conception having eased that to create their family really do not get any kind of sensitive service or very rarely get that very sensitive service from the child or adult mental health services that we have currently in this country. I tried doing various bits of teaching to increase people's sensitivity to it, but it really is a difficult task for me, for the little me. Clinics where treatment was provided might not be

	<p>appropriate context, so the biggest question I think is, does this indicate that finally we have to address a need for dedicated service where expertise can be developed and disseminate it across professionals who might have nothing to do with ART at all? (round of applause)</p>
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