

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO MATTERS RELATING TO DONOR CONCEPTION

I am a solo mother by choice who used a sperm donor within Victoria and as a result have been fortunate to be able to access the services of VARTA – Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority. As a result of mine and my daughter's experiences working with VARTA I strongly believe every state and territory should fund a similar organisation to assist donor conceived people, their families and the donors.

Attempt to gain information directly through the IVF clinic

Contact with donor

When I was pregnant with my daughter, I wrote a letter to the donor thanking him and asking a couple of questions. I organised a P.O. Box address and anonymous email address to enable him to reply without the need for sharing identifying information. I gave the letter to my clinic and asked them to pass it onto him. I didn't hear back from them but a while later, after giving birth, I asked if they had forwarded the letter, since I'd had no reply. They told me they had been unable to make contact with him due to him being in the defence forces.

We have since made contact with the donor via VARTA and he has told me the clinic never attempted to contact him, that he has the same mobile phone number and email address as he had when he donated a decade earlier and he was only in the army reserves so he was not in the defence forces to make it difficult to contact him.

It appears the clinic simply didn't want to enable any sort of information exchange.

Confirmation of donor siblings

When my daughter was 2 months old, I was contacted by another solo mum who had read a post I had written about my frustration with my clinic not passing on the letter for the donor. She private messaged me to state that she used the same clinic and her donor was also in the defence forces so she wondered if it was the same donor. She sent me the donor number and I checked my file and found that yes, it was the same donor number. This mum-to-be was 7 months pregnant at the time.

Our two children have had the great fortune to grow up knowing each other and knowing they have the same donor, something that they are both very grateful for, and I know is generally quite rare when clinics are involved.

When our children were a few years old I was contacted by another solo mum who claimed to have used the same donor. Parts of her story didn't seem to make sense and she didn't have the donor number so I wasn't sure whether to believe her or not. I sent a message to the clinic we had all apparently used and asked if they could confirm if we had used the same

donor. I provided the names of the 3 mothers, the dates of birth, genders and names of the children and simply asked if they could confirm from their records if we had all used the same donor. I received an abusive email back telling me that it was a breach of privacy to discuss the donor – even though I had provided all details and simply asked them to just say yes or no. As a result of this, as the second mothers' story didn't seem to add up, I didn't pursue ongoing contact with her or her children. Through VARTA we have now been able to confirm that she most likely did use the same donor (more about that later). It was very frustrating that my clinic couldn't have confirmed this at the time so the children could have had ongoing contact.

VARTA Voluntary register

When my daughter was a few years old I registered with the VARTA voluntary register. At that time, and still today, no one else connected to the donor, nor the donor himself, were on the register. It was disappointing and makes me very grateful that the Central Register exists in Victoria.

VARTA Central register

When my daughter was 9 years old and we had been through several Covid lockdowns in Victoria, she asked me if she was able to email her donor. I'm not sure if she would have been interested at this age if life had been continuing as normal, but through lockdowns she had started emailing different friends and family members and doing video calls, Webex/skype etc playdates and suddenly it seemed quite normal to connect with people online. I explained to her that I didn't know who the donor was, but we were lucky there was an organisation that might be able to find out for us and see if he was willing to exchange emails. I explained about VARTA and we explored their website and watched some videos. I was careful to make sure she understood that VARTA might end up not being able to find the donor, or they might find him but he might say no he didn't want contact. She understood but wanted us to try.

Donor Contact

We were very fortunate that VARTA were able to locate my daughter's donor as he still had the same mobile number and email address. He did a phone counselling session with VARTA and was sent our application form. He took a week to think about it and discuss with his partner (at VARTA's recommendation) and then called them back and said yes he would be happy to have his email address passed onto us.

VARTA phoned us with the good news in December 2020. I immediately sent an email to the donor introducing ourselves and explaining why we had initiated contact. My daughter asked for some photos of him and his favourite piece of artwork (as his donor profile stated he liked doing art). He happily responded with several photos of himself, his family and his artwork. He explained that he was surprised but happy to hear from VARTA. In later emails he explained he had never been contacted by the clinic at all in regards to a letter from any of

this recipients. Over the past year and a bit he has happily answered almost all my daughter's questions and been excited to see photos of her, her pets and her artwork. He also explained that he had never heard of VARTA before they contacted him and knew nothing about the voluntary register (hence the reason he had never joined it). His partner has also been happy to hear from us and I have exchanged a couple of messages directly with her, after the donor provided her contact details as well.

Through VARTA we were also given a more detailed donor profile than the clinic had provided (and discovered that the donor was much more multicultural than the clinic profile suggested). My daughter has enjoyed studying a bit about the countries that she has connections to.

Connecting with Donor siblings

Through VARTA we also received a list of the donor siblings in family groups, with gender and month and year of birth. Through this list we were able to confirm that the donor brother my daughter has grown up knowing, is indeed the one closest in age to her. We were also able to confirm that the other solo mum who had made contact with me, most likely did use the same donor as there were boy/girl twins born the same month as her children. Finally, we were able to see there were two other donor siblings, a boy and girl born to 2 women in the same family group – thus counted as 2 women for the 5 women limit at my clinic. I was able to do some detective work and reach out to the mother of the twins and have email contact, but I think our relationship has been damaged because of the early distrust and the clinic's refusal to confirm they shared the same donor. I was also able to use a few social networks and with a very general description of clinic and years I was able to request people who thought they used the same donor to contact me. I was contacted by the lesbian couple and we were able to confirm through the donor number that we had used the same donor. They want to wait until their children request contact with donor siblings before introducing us, so for now the mothers have just provided my daughter with some photos, the names and a brief description of each child. My daughter and I are grateful that we at least know who they are and have the possibility of future contact.

Conclusion

My daughter, now 10, believes that everyone should have the right to know their genetic relatives – the donor and donor siblings. She and the donor brother who is only 4 months younger than her, have a very special, close friendship. Despite living a few hours apart and only seeing each other face to face a couple of times a year, they enjoy talking about their donor brother or donor sister to other friends, love talking over the internet, and especially love every moment they get to spend together. When I mentioned to my daughter, that if she had been born in Queensland, she would not have been able to use a service like VARTA to make contact with her donor, she was shocked. She is grateful she was born in Victoria and sorry for kids like her who were born in Queensland. From our experiences, we both believe that clinics can not be trusted to manage donor information and that a central body,

like VARTA should be set up in Queensland, to store donor records and provide counselling to donors and donor-conceived people who wish to make contact with each other. I believe that the fact that our clinic chose to edit the information provided on the donor profile, so as to not reveal the multicultural background of the donor, is an indication they can not be trusted. Add to this the fact my clinic lied about attempting to make contact with the donor, and sent an abusive email to me when I attempted to confirm that people claiming to be my daughter's donor siblings, were in fact related to her, and I think you have all the evidence you need to show that fertility clinics should not be given the power to control what information is or isn't made available to donors, recipients and donor-conceived people.

It is also worth noting that my daughter's donor stated that he was not given the option to be anything other than ID-release at 18. He didn't choose to have his identity kept anonymous until that time. The clinic made that decision. The clinic also chose to not inform him about VARTA's services. In his profile general comment, he stated that he was willing to meet with recipients, which is part of the reason I choose him.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Email address: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

I am happy to have my submission published but would like my name withheld.