

It's just you and me, baby

Helen O'Callaghan meets a group of women who decided to become solo parents through sperm donation



A GROUP of 30 women meet for a picnic on an April Sunday afternoon in the grounds of Dublin's Irish Museum of Modern Art. Their accents are West of Ireland, Cork, many from Dublin. Some are in their 30s, others closer to 50. One or two are pregnant, two are trying for a baby, the rest have children. They had one thing in common — their choice to become single (solo) parents through sperm donation.

This meeting organised four months ago was the first national meeting of their support group. The instigator was Vicki, a solo mum from Cork. Now 38, she'd worried at 30 that fibroids and cysts could cut short her fertility. By the time she was 34, 90% of her friends had babies and she was "borderline depressed" after her best friend had her third child. "I'd always had donor conception in my mind as a back-up plan if I didn't meet Mr Right," she says. Deciding to take matters into her own hands, she found little information about 'solo mums by choice' in Ireland. A thread on the donor conception section of parenting website www.rollercoaster.ie proved a lifeline, particularly when a second round of IUI failed. She was "absolutely devastated" but, on her third round, fell pregnant with her now 20-month-old daughter, conceived through sperm donation from a Danish sperm bank.

The 10 or so women who were consistently on the Rollercoaster thread ("with others dipping in and out") were a vital support on her journey.

"When I had my daughter, I moved into the parenting phase. I was at a different stage. I suggested setting up a Facebook group. It's a private group that doesn't come up in searches — some members didn't want the group to come up in their public profile. It's a great source of support.

"We have about 50 members, some with one child, some with more, some pregnant, some trying, some thinking about the option of solo parenthood. We feel we don't fall into the category of single or lone parents in the traditional sense, so the group is a place we can vent, chat and get advice." Opting to have a baby via donor conception is a huge decision that throws up soul-searching questions.

Aoife, 40, Dublin-based mother of a two-year-old daughter, was still single at 38 and "much sadder" about not becoming a mum than about not meeting a life partner.

"I heard sperm donation was something single women could do and it fitted — there was no doubt in my mind. Within days, I had the wheels in motion. I phoned Clane Fertility Clinic and got an appointment for a few weeks later."

Then the enormity of it struck her. "Friends and family were saying do it if it would make me happy. Nobody was negative. That made me more nervous — it seemed such a huge thing for nobody to have reservations. I had reservations. Bringing a child into the world without a dad, was that an OK thing to do?"

Through a process of counselling that took a few months, as well as lots of research — "which showed it's not the number or gender of parents that dictate outcomes for a child but love" — Aoife

FERTILITY TREATMENT: THE PROCESS

■ Facility to help woman achieve pregnancy via donor sperm is offered in most Irish fertility clinics.

■ Woman self-refers to clinic. Her fertility history is assessed through taking a routine history; blood sample determines egg reserve and assesses ovulation.

■ Woman browses website of donor sperm bank such as Cryos International in Denmark, ranging through options for hair and eye colour, for weight, height, race and edu-

cational background — perhaps looking at a potential donor's baby photo or reading donor bank clinic staff's impressions of him.

■ Her fertility clinic here can advise on quality/quantity of sperm required and can order, receive and store the sperm for her. The clinic can also check that the donor hasn't exceeded the maximum number of families created in Ireland (three in this jurisdiction).

■ The procedure, which is done at

time of ovulation, feels similar to a smear test. The sperm is prepared and placed in a thin, flexible catheter. This is passed through the cervix into the uterus and the sperm is deposited close to the egg.

■ If a woman orders donor sperm online and self-inseminates at home, cost of donor sperm can range from €500-€1,500 depending on quality and quantity. At a fertility clinic, cost of the procedure (donor sperm and one cycle of IUI) is approximately €1,000.

awareness of the need to keep in step with the new legislative reality.

Ann Bracken, fertility counselling manager in The Lister Hospital in Chelsea, London, has met adult donor children who are "perfectly happy with how they came into the world and others who really aren't". From Ireland, she previously worked in a Dublin fertility clinic, and is relieved at the new Irish legislation. "As a country we previously provided no identifying information to adult children who were adopted — we thought they had no right to know, that it wasn't important. This caused immense suffering. It's important we don't create another generation who don't have the right to know their genetic history, because of anonymous donation."

Bracken understands people struggling to have a baby — or grieving loss of a genetic child or life-partner to have one with — might underestimate the emotional needs of an adult child born from donation.

"It's hard to perceive, when wanting a baby, that this baby will become an adult. This may be encouraged by medical practitioners — to ignore that it's donation [a donor is involved] and to just have the treatment."

This may be well-intentioned to support parents' needs but it sows the seeds to compromise the emotional, psychological and identity needs of the child. "It can mean a child grows up not being

told of their actual origins and if the parent(s) chose an anonymous donor, [the child has] no way of ever having any information. Parents and medical practitioners know their origins so they don't necessarily empathise that a child/adult child would need this information for themselves."

Pregnancy through donor-conception has traditionally been under-reported here. Ole Schou confirms 920 reported pregnancies in Ireland from Cryos International donor sperm since 2000. But Cryos estimates that only about 50% of pregnancies from Ireland are reported.

Declan Keane says donor-conception pregnancy goes under-reported because women can source sperm online — without involving fertility clinics — and self-inseminate.

"Once licensed fertility clinics here have achieved three pregnancies from a particular donor, that donor can't be used in Ireland again. But women who privately source donor sperm don't report a pregnancy. We're trying to keep 'diblings' — siblings from same donor — to a limit. But if you don't know how many pregnancies have resulted from a donor, how do you stop a potential 'dibling' conjugation in future?"

Vicki says choosing a sperm donor is a bit like online dating — from logging onto a website, entering preferences (eye/hair colour, height, college education) and viewing profiles to find a match for your criteria. "I didn't mind about hair or eye colour. I wanted a tall guy so hopefully she wouldn't be a short ass like me!

"I chose an open [non-anonymous] donor. I wanted her to have the option of making contact with him when she's 18. I felt anonymous donation would shut her off from that part of her life. I initially chose the short profile — hair/eye colour and occupation.

The extended profile gives you baby photos of the donor, full personality profile and 24 pages about his life and interests. I found it a bit spooky, having that much information. It was different when I had my baby.

"Thankfully, the extended profile was available and the fertility clinic got it for me. All the research says

give the child as many tools as possible [about genetic identity]."

Vicki aims to be honest with her daughter about her origins but also to manage her expectations. "'Donor' is the term we'll use. I'll never call him dad — she doesn't have a dad. I won't allow her have set ideas in her head about what she might find if she chooses to make contact. There are no guarantees — he could be dead or not at the same address."

Aoife, who chose an open donor through a California sperm bank, is in touch with the family of her daughter's donor-conceived sibling. "I feel it's very important for her to know her genetic identity. It's really interesting — he's a little boy and his first word was the same as my daughter's. They're both obsessed with ducks and their first word was 'duck'. They're both easy-going, placid kids. It's not like we're best buddies [the families] but we'd like to meet up in the future."

Aoife says meeting the donor would be "an adventure" and Vicki says she'd "want to thank him" if she ever met him. While everyone in the support group intends telling their child how they were conceived, around 50% opted for anonymous donation. "Some chose the anonymous route.

Others used clinics here or abroad that only allowed anonymous. Some certainly have had second thoughts — they worry about how it will be perceived by the child down the line," says Vicki.

But the overwhelming feeling among the women is gratitude for their babies. Vicki says that at the recent Dublin meet-up it was "overwhelming in a good way to see so many mums and so many happy children of all ages". These women feel they don't fit the mould for lone parenting. "We don't have the usual issues relating to visitation or child support or damage to a child because of another parent's actions. We chose to become single parents and are happy to be parenting in this way."

Sure there are lonely days when they'd like to have a co-parent walk in the door to help. There are practical issues like getting a passport ("one or two women have had to get letters from clinics proving they used a sperm donor") or what to put on the birth cert. And while Vicki and Aoife's families have been supportive of their decision — as have many of the women's — some have lost friends or have parents who don't speak to them.

In myriad ways, these women intend to support each other. "It will be great for the kids in years to come to be able to identify with other families who are the same," says Vicki.

She worries about her daughter's emotional development. "Whether she will be OK with my choice to have her alone, will she be angry with me, will she feel she has missed out? I hope, because she's so surrounded by love and so wanted, that she'll never feel like that. But you never know."

In Dublin, after their four-hour picnic, the women say their good-byes with repeated promises to "do this more often".

Aoife's prediction rings true: "Our children are all quite young. This group hasn't come into its own yet. This is a platform for more meaningful, organic relationships to occur."

