

Money Shots: College students profit, help infertile couples by donating their sperm and eggs

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He's a 6 foot 1 inch philosophy major with green eyes. He likes Descartes and Sartre, speaks French and Latin and wants to visit Paris. He loves dogs, describes himself as "outgoing" and wants to be a professor or a novelist.

He's donor #3575 - and he's ready and willing to father the children of complete strangers.

Donor #3575 is only one of about 130 men listed in the California Cryobank's catalog, which describes sperm donors whose genetic material is available to those wanting to produce a child through in vitro fertilization.

The bank's database is a veritable catalog of physical attributes and personal qualities. Some donors are musically inclined, others describe themselves as talented in math and science, while still others brag about their athletic abilities.

All of these men participated in sperm donation, which many college students take up for altruistic or financial reasons. Sperm donation, along with egg donation for females, allows those in their late teens and 20s who pass a battery of genetic, physical and mental examinations to help infertile couples have children - and they often receive handsome pay in the process.

SPERM DONATION

Most of the donors at the California Cryobank - a sperm bank with branches in Cambridge, Los Angeles and Palo Alto, Calif. - are college students, but Kristy Macedo, the bank's donor program coordinator, said the bank does have some working professionals in its catalog.

While some sperm banks let men become known donors - allowing recipients to discover their identities once the children they father turn 18 - the California Cryobank only uses anonymous donors. Recipients can glean many details of the donor's temperament and preferences - down to a donor's favorite color and food - but the donor's name is never revealed.

Men who wish to donate with the California Cryobank must first complete a screening process, which includes filling out a donor profile with academic information, physical attributes, personal interests and religion, having blood drawn twice - once for an infectious disease screening and once for a genetic screening - meeting with the bank's genetic counselor and undergoing a physical examination, Macedo said.



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Those men whose samples and medical history pass are then committed to donating at least once a week for a minimum of six months.

Donors at the California Cryobank receive \$75 per "acceptable donation," Macedo said, meaning that the sample meets standards for sperm concentration and the number of living cells it contains.

Payment is not based on physical or mental attributes but solely on the quality of the sample, she said.

"There's no scale," Macedo said. "That's not an issue here."

While donating may seem like easy money for cash-strapped college students, many donors also donate for less selfish reasons.

"Some are in it for the money," Macedo said. "But I think most of them are in it so they can help infertile couples."

One Boston University student said he donated because he does not plan on having his own children but is "gifted with good genes."

The student, who requested anonymity because of his donor agreement, said he was also drawn by the pay, which amounted to about \$600 per month.

He said the initial testing - including genetic testing, urine analysis, blood draws and "many interviews" - took about five months, and the bank at which he donated expected a six-month commitment.

Once the donor delivers his sample, the bank's laboratory processes it and places it in vials, which are frozen and quarantined for 180 days to ensure they do not contain infectious diseases, Macedo said. Then the specimens become available for recipients to select from.

California Cryobank offers a donor matching program, which Macedo said helps potential recipients match donors' facial features with those of their partners. However, recipients face no restrictions on what sperm they may choose.

"Ultimately it comes down to the recipient deciding which donor they want to purchase a specimen from," Macedo said.

EGG DONATION

The calls come in the classified ads: offers of \$3,500-plus for female non-smokers between the ages of 21 and 33 who are willing to donate their eggs. While egg donation also offers payoffs and the prospect of helping others, egg donors face a far more involved and invasive process than sperm donors.

During the egg donation process, donors' ovaries must be stimulated to produce as many eggs as possible - usually by self-injecting hormones over a seven to 10 day period, according to Larry Keating, a liaison with the Reproductive Science Center, a Reading fertility clinic.



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In a normal ovulation cycle, women usually produce only one egg. With hormonal stimulation, however, "we're trying to get seven or 10 or more to hopefully have more chances of fertilization and ultimately implantation," Keating said.

If the hormone treatments work, the donor's ovaries are covered in what looks like several cysts - the follicles which hopefully contain viable eggs. Following a light general anesthesia and vaginal insertion of a catheter, he said the eggs are vacuumed from the ovaries.

Following retrieval, the follicles are examined under a microscope, and if eggs are found, fertilization begins. During this process, Keating said about 50,000 sperm are placed on top of the egg in hopes that one will penetrate and fertilize. This process repeats for each egg removed from the donor's body.

Retrieval is "fairly painless," Keating said, with most donors experiencing slight cramps after the procedure.

However, egg donors do face some potential medical problems.

About one of every 200 donors experiences "hyperstimulation"- an overgrowth of eggs that causes severe cramping, Keating said. Donors also run the risk of negative reactions to the injected hormones, but he said donors usually know the likelihood of this beforehand.

Donors must also deal with the idea of giving up one of their potential offspring to help another family.

"That's basically what you're doing," Keating said. "You're giving one of your children up for adoption."

While Keating said his clinic does not typically get involved in the legal issues surrounding egg donation, all parties involved usually sign an affidavit in which the donor waives her legal rights to the child.

"Once you've donated the eggs, that's it," he said. "You're basically done."

And while some egg donors, like sperm donors, may chose to make their identities known, most opt to remain anonymous, Keating said.

"If the child decides later on in life to search out their biological mother ... however they do that, they do that," he said.

Compensation for egg donors varies, with many payments arranged through brokerage agencies that specialize in matching donors with prospective parents, Keating said.

At Tiny Treasures, a Somerville brokerage agency, donors set their own fees, although the agency offers suggested rates, according to the agency's website.

Tiny Treasures suggests first-time donors charge anywhere between \$2,000 and \$5,000 but "extraordinary" donors - those with SAT scores above 1250, ACT scores above 28, college GPAs above 3.5 or those who have attended Ivy League universities - charge between \$5,000 and \$7,000 for their services.



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Keating said the Reproductive Science Center has stopped recruiting donors on its own because most donors go through brokerage services or use attorneys to negotiate fees based on what prospective parents are willing to pay.

"If the individual recipient is willing to pay ... they'll go [to an attorney] and say, 'I'm willing to pay \$10,000 or \$15,000,'" Keating said. "The recipient would pay that 10 or 15 thousand, and the donor might get 10 and the attorney would keep five."

Keating said perhaps 60 percent of donors are "altruistic" because they know someone who has had difficulty conceiving a child or simply want to help an infertile woman have children.

However, "there is money to be made off of it," and in some cases, Keating said the prospect of a hefty paycheck is enough for women to endure the time-consuming and occasionally unpleasant process.

"If we feel as a clinic that they are straight for the money, we drop them out of the program," Keating said. "We won't allow those people to donate eggs."