

Conservatives line up against sperm donors, but lack the power to ban them

by [Chris Lisee](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) A new documentary exploring the ethical implications of sperm donation is creating a buzz among religious audiences.

"Anonymous Father's Day" delves into bioethics from the perspective of donor-conceived children who grow up not knowing their biological fathers. The film gives fodder to opponents of assisted reproductive technology, who argue the fertility "industry" has led to psychologically scarred children and the "commodification" of human life.

ART's ethical implications are not solely a religious issue, and "Anonymous Father's Day" makes no explicit religious claims. But its promotion of heterosexual marriage attracts religious audiences, who oppose the reproductive alternatives ART facilitates.

Jennifer Lahl, the writer, director and producer behind the film, recently held back-to-back screenings in Washington, D.C., at the conservative Christian-focused Family Research Council and the Catholic Information Center. Lahl plans future showings at Christian institutions.

This is the second film on gamete donation by Lahl, founder and president of The Center for Bioethics and Culture, a California-based nonprofit that studies beginning and end-of-life issues.

Though the center is not religiously affiliated, Lahl considers herself a "little'o' Orthodox Christian," and said faith can offer a strong basis for bioethical concerns.

"I think it naturally aligns for people of faith because we're concerned about the embryo and the unborn," said Lahl, a registered nurse. "We're concerned about the barren womb, and life issues, and justice."

Religious groups glom onto the controversy. Sperm donation allows single mothers, lesbian couples and unmarried couples to have children. And children that are born to married couples who use sperm donation have a different biological father than the one that raises them.

"There is a significant ethical problem -- in terms of anonymous gamete donations -- in terms of family structure," said David Prentice, a senior fellow for life sciences at the Family Research Council.

The council does not take a stand against in vitro fertilization per se. But Prentice says sperm donation raises the moral issue of respect for a child.

"We have a perspective that all human life should be treated with dignity," he said. "The kids should be conceived in love because there's a desire for them."

But Scott Brown, director of communications at California Cryobank, said this is exactly how donor-conceived children are treated.

"What would be different than a single woman or a lesbian couple adopting a child versus creating a child from their own genetic material plus a donor?" he said.

"I think the parents that choose to use a sperm donor -- whether they're heterosexual, homosexual, or single -- are more committed, more dedicated, and go through so much more emotional and financial strain to achieve their goal of parenthood than the average person who can just conceive naturally," he said.

It's unknown how many donor-conceived children are born in the United States each year, but 30-60,000 is a common estimate. According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates, more than 1 percent of children are born through ART, which includes in vitro fertilization without donor gametes.

Several European countries have banned anonymous sperm donation. In the United Kingdom, for instance, children of gamete donors may seek their biological parent's identity at age 18.

Different sperm banks in the U.S. offer different anonymity options, and much ink has been spilled over the ethics and repercussions of donating.

But Brown said studies about psychological harm are often conducted by sectarian organizations opposed to the practice, making results sketchy at best.

One study found that 45 percent of donor offspring were bothered by the circumstances of their conception, while an equal portion was put off by the economic transaction it involved. It was conducted by the Center for Marriage and Families at the conservative Institute for American Values.

Many of these studies claim to value the child's "dignity" over the parent's "right" to have a child.

This view was echoed by Tadeusz Pacholczyk, a Catholic priest with a Ph.D. in neuroscience from Yale University, who serves as an ethicist and director of education for the National Catholic Bioethics Center. He argued that many forms of ART involve a "power move" that violates the dignity of a child -- and the golden rule.

"We treat our children differently than we ourselves would want to be treated," he said. "None of us would ever want to be frozen. None of us would ever want to be experimented on, as is done in pre-implantation genetic diagnosis."

Lahl laments the control ART gives parents over procreation, like a "cafeteria-style menu" of genetic traits, from intelligence to eye color. Prentice fears "commodification and manufacturing of children."

Brown, of California Cryobank, dismisses these claims, saying that parents don't typically "upgrade" but rather seek a close biological match to their own features.

"The science exists, but no one within the sperm donor industry has any interest in designer babies. It's not what we do," he said.

He emphasizes genetic tests on fetuses are used to detect diseases that could harm the child. "You can argue that is crossing the line, but at the end of the day I think that you're doing something better for the health of the child and for the family," he said.

For Lahl, the film is only the first step in fighting ART.

"I'd love to see the anonymity removed," she said. But even more, she added, "I'd like to see the practice (of gamete donation) altogether stopped. I'm not a fan of third-party reproduction."