

Women shopping for super sperm

By Sue Montgomery
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MONTREAL -- Rachel Clarkson is in the market for sperm.

Not just any old sperm. Clarkson wants quality the kind of tenacious swimmers produced by upstanding, virile young men. Pure, salt-of-the-Earth sperm that produces chubby Gerber babies that grow up to attend Harvard and discover a cure for cancer.

At 46, with a brand new hip and no man at the ready, Clarkson has spent weeks shopping online, wading through pages and pages of detailed profiles of men who are paid to ejaculate a few times a week into a cup at a clinic. She's whittling her choice to a top-three list. The winner will provide 23 chromosomes to line up with her own 23 and the result, she hopes, will be a baby she can call her own.

"It's very weird," admitted Clarkson, a single teacher in Winnipeg who asked that her real name not be used. "It's a bit like Lavalife, like dating online, without having to date."

Ever since March 2004, when Canada outlawed payments for donor sperm and eggs on the principle that selling human tissue is unethical, the availability of home-grown donor sperm has dropped. The few men who qualified to donate sperm, after going through a rigorous screening process, lost interest once the financial incentive was removed.

But American sperm banks slickly marketed commercial enterprises still offer donors up to \$100 US a pop, and consequently they offer women a vast choice and more detail than many dream of.

The majority of these women are single or in a lesbian relationship, while a smaller number have a spouse who is infertile, but all are desperate to have a child who carries at least some of their genes. Like singles looking for a date, they scan the U.S. sperm bank websites, reading dozens of profiles that tell them everything from the donor's shoe size and eyelash length to whether he suffers from vertigo or has a hairy chest.

None of the banks will reveal how much sperm is shipped to Canada, fearing encroachment from competitors. As they vie for wombs, each tries to outdo the other: California Cryobank boasts that it now has "Nordic donors" and that its online catalogue is updated hourly.

Rainbow Flag Health Services claims to be the only sperm bank to reveal the donor's identity when the child is just three months old (call 1-510-763-SPERM).

Northwest Andrology & Cryobank Inc. will ship to a woman's home without a doctor's consent.

And Fairfax Cryobank provides photos showing the donor at different stages of his life, "so you can see if they get better as they get older or if it be the reverse," said vice-president William Jaeger. It also offers a 15-minute personality test for donors as well as recipients.

Once a woman makes her three top choices, the bank ships whatever's in stock to her doctor and it's inserted at a fertile moment, with the whole process costing up to \$2,000 US per try.

Critics find the whole idea of choosing a donor based on IQ and looks distasteful, saying it smacks of eugenics; and they disagree with selling gametes as commodities.

Others, like Wendy Baker, donor co-ordinator at Vancouver's Genesis Fertility Clinic, say such online shopping empowers women at a time when they feel they have no control over their bodies a huge improvement from the days when doctors chose the donor for the women.

Brenda Blass, a Canadian woman living in New York with her two-year-old daughter, said the burden of choosing the donor was huge. She felt a bit like she was playing God.

"I considered adoption, but I wanted someone who sort of looked like me, I wanted the genetic connection and I wanted to be pregnant," said Blass, who didn't want her real name used. After considering one donor who resembled Brad Pitt and another described as even-keeled, friendly and "just a nice, nice guy" who looked like Christian Slater, she went with the latter, #0500 from Fairfax Cryobank.

Back in Winnipeg, Clarkson scoured the American online catalogues, but in the end she decided to go with Toronto-based Repromed, which has a roster of just 30 Canadian donors. It just seemed less commercial, she said. Instead of seeing a baby and an adult photo, or even hearing an audio recording things available on the American sites Clarkson was only shown photos of tidbits of her chosen few: an ear, a nose, eyes and a blurry picture of the whole face. That, along with some information about the donors' education, set her back \$250.

She has narrowed her choices to a science-oriented guy, who also happens to be the favourite donor of the woman working in the clinic, and a perky veterinarian from Colombia. Number three has yet to be chosen.

"At first I thought, how much do I really want to know?" she said in a telephone interview. "I guess it's because the extra information is there and you can see it, so you do.

"The other reason is I used to date a guy who told me about a friend in Cambridge who had the worst acne and was donating sperm. You could see from the pictures if there was anything freakish."

Although she started out interested only in personality, Clarkson admitted to having rejected some donors because they were bald and had funny shaped heads; others

because they had arthritis and alcoholism in their families. Such selection, she reasoned, is really no different from other species.

"There's a reason why male peacocks have all those feathers," she said. "If a wolf is bigger and stronger, it means his offspring will hopefully be that way and better to survive. In our culture, if our children are more attractive, whatever that is in this decade, they will have an easier life in many ways."

When the emotional side of reproducing is removed, you're left with a decision based on survival of the fittest and natural selection, reasoned Mary Hartley of Xytex Corporation. And by going to a sperm bank, you get the creme de la creme, both in genes and sperm, she said.

"When you're in love and in a family, you don't think, 'Well, dang, you have such a terrible history of heart disease, I'm not going to have babies with you,' you go ahead and do it and live with it anyway.

"But when you can think about things rationally, you don't do that."

In the 20 years that Hartley has been recruiting donors for Xytex, she's become attached to many, as if they were her own sons.

"They are just so precious," she said in an interview from Atlanta, Ga. "We've got several favourites who are funny, not embarrassed to talk about being a donor, are friendly and very confident young men. The kind of man you'd want your son to grow up to be.

"But of course, what makes them my favourite is that they have good sperm counts."

She calls one to the phone a shy-sounding 21-year-old college frat boy who Hartley says "sells out really fast."

He was drawn to the clinic three years ago, he said, after seeing an ad on campus (one sperm bank's slogan is "why not get paid for it?") He comes in up to three times a week, getting US\$65 each time, and knows he has at least one child out there.

"I'm leaning more towards not releasing my ID," he said. "I don't want a whole lot of kids coming to me when they're 18, unless they're famous."

Back on the phone and sounding a bit like a doting grandmother, Hartley lets out a sigh and continues in her southern drawl, "It's a little sad to think that a child that would be a product of his specimen won't even know him.

"He's just a decent, decent young man. You can just tell."

Another, referred to only as Donor Y, comes from her supply of married donors. At 39, he and his wife have had one miscarriage and given birth to a daughter. They're saving all the donor money for her college education, but Donor Y's main motivation is helping others.

"I was in the military and know some soldiers who after the first Gulf War had problems with infertility or had a child born with birth defects," he said. "I wanted to help them."

"My wife is Catholic and it's kind of borderline against that belief, but we see it as a different way of tithing."

Whatever the donors' reasons for giving sperm, the cherry picking that subsequently takes place doesn't sit well with Kathleen Glass, director of McGill University's Biomedical Ethics Unit. She worries about what kind of expectations are placed on a child born to a woman wanting to create superior offspring.

"If you're so interested in programming right down to that kind of detail, it's hyperparenting to the extreme," she said. "There are thoughtful people who don't think of it as anything more than doing the best for their child, but they start thinking of it as a product or project, instead of a baby or child."

It also reflects society's willingness to commercialize everything, including families, she added.

But Baker of Vancouver's Genesis Fertility Centre says it makes perfect sense to shop online for sperm, because women can get an idea of what's important to them. The clinic then tries to ease what for many becomes an overwhelming experience trying to choose "the perfect man."

"This is where the word compromise comes in," she said. "We stress that although it's important for them to choose a donor with whom they are comfortable, whose characteristics are a 'fit' with their particular needs, donor sperm is merely a piece of genetic material, a means to an end."