

Another View on Family

Four years ago I was watching my sister approach the end of her options to conceive a child with her own eggs. She had spent many years on the IVF roller-coaster and I offered to donate my eggs to her if she could not conceive with her own. Fortunately she was successful and I have two beautiful nieces, Natalie and Danielle. Therefore she had no need for my eggs.

So I went looking for a couple who needed some eggs. I made contact with a hospital in Adelaide that dealt with infertility and made some enquiries about egg donation. We discussed anonymous egg donation but after a lot of consideration I went back to them and asked if I could do known donation as I wanted to meet the woman and allow her to ask me any questions about my health / personality, etc. But this was not permitted as the hospital's policy was for the couples to find their own donors or for donors to be anonymous.

My next step was to find a recipient myself. I spoke to a support group and let them know I was looking and eventually a mutual friend said she knew of someone who may need some donor eggs.

My husband, Simon, was supportive of my desire to help another couple have a family of their own. (Even though he thought I was quite mad.) On the 3rd of January 1998, we met Sue and Doug via a friend and had a morning tea to meet and get to know them and vice versa. I was very nervous at the thought of these people looking at me thinking, "You may be the biological mother of my child" and I thought they were probably taking note of my mannerisms, speech, family environment, and everything else you could possibly think of. It was quite terrifying and yet I knew these people were probably scared too.

I liked them on first impressions and felt very comfortable, although extremely nervous and, as usual, I talked a million words a minute. Sue was how I had expected, but that was probably because we had spoken about our hair and eye colour and height, but I was still amazed at how alike we were.

Doug had blond hair and looked a lot younger than what I had imagined. He was very quiet and chatted to my husband most of the time. I hadn't considered Doug's feelings that much as I couldn't put myself in his shoes as I had no comprehension of what goes on in a male's mind. I had prepared a list of all the things I thought they would want to know about me. My good habits, bad habits, medical history, family tree (basic), academic achievements, work history. I know if I had simply told them it wouldn't sink in and felt they wouldn't want to get out a note pad and take notes. I wanted them to know everything about me, everything that I would want to know if the roles were reversed and to answer any questions they had, which I hadn't considered, as this was a big decision for them.

I was expecting Sue to be quite emotional and was surprised when she was very composed and quite matter of fact. I thought she would be getting all excited about the thought of this going ahead and have a million questions for me. I now know her reasons for not getting too excited. Luckily through my sister's experience she gave me some possible reasons why Sue was not how I had expected her to be. She explained to me Sue may not have wanted to get her hopes up in case it didn't work out. (This knowledge was vital as I was quite emotional and was looking for an emotional reaction and puzzled by her matter of fact manner.)

From that meeting we planned to go ahead with setting up a donor cycle at the next available opportunity. We agreed to do the donor cycle at the reproductive clinic as this was where Sue and Doug had done previous cycles.

At the time of the donor egg cycle my children were aged 3 and 5. We explained to the kids how mummy was giving some eggs to Sue because her eggs wouldn't work. My 5 year old grasped that concept quite

well at the time and asked were her eggs cracked. We explained to him that Sue's eggs were not making babies. He didn't ask any other questions as I recall. We did explain it was to be "Doug's seed and mummy's egg and Sue is going to carry the egg in her tummy and be the mummy." He seemed ok with that. Nicole, aged 3 at the time, listened but I don't know how much she really understood. But she understood her mum was going to help Sue and Doug have a baby.

An added benefit was the fact that both kids had met Sue and Doug so they knew who we were talking about. Sue was a real hit with my kids and she even slept over one night and looked after them on one occasion when I had to be at the hospital early in the morning for a blood test.

I looked back in my diary to when I was nearly ready for the egg collection and read on one page how my 5 year old at the time was worried that if my belly was squashed all the eggs inside me would crack. I remember we didn't correct him as I felt very bloated and didn't want him jumping all over me. It worked really well.

In May 1998 we had our first attempt at an IVF cycle. Sue and Doug supported me throughout the treatment. Sue came to the scan and I kept her up to date with all the happenings from the morning my period came (we had a laugh at the thought of me ringing another couple to let them know I had my period – it was quite bizarre) til the call to say when the eggs were being collected. I liked the fact she was doing this with me, it made me feel like she really cared about me and I wanted her to come to any appointments and be involved as much as she wanted to. The cycle was a huge success with 31 eggs from which 17 embryos were successfully frozen. I had no feelings of loss or sadness with the eggs gone but of relief it was all over and happiness that Sue and Doug had lots of eggs which I felt would give them a better chance of fertilisation.

The kids were 7 months older when Sue became pregnant. I had continued throughout the 7 months to talk to the kids about Sue and Doug and how we hoped they would have a baby soon. Throughout Sue's pregnancy we occasionally talked about Sue and Doug's baby and how mummy had given some eggs to Sue so she could have a baby. The kids understood and most of the time said, "Yes, yes we know."

In June 1999 Nicole, my youngest, came to the hospital with my husband and me to see Sue and Doug's baby, Caitlin, when she was born. We again talked to her about the baby and about my part in her conception. I don't think she really cared about the where or how of it all, she just loved all babies at the time and wanted to have a hold.

Ethan, my six year old, was quite a livewire at the time and we didn't think the hospital would be ready for him, I think he also had a touch of the sniffles and we didn't want to pass it on to Sue or the baby. So he stayed with my parents which he was pretty happy about. We took several photos of Caitlin at the hospital, to show him later.

Since then we've talked about Caitlin, Sue and Doug just to keep the information up to date. We hope by the time the children really understand about the birds and the bees and the science of what happened, it won't be a big issue. It will just be a normal part of their lives.

Both my kids saw Caitlin in January this year. I think Ethan left a bit of an impression after frightening her with his toy spiders, while Nicole shared her dolls house and got on very well with her. As for the future, when they grow up they may want to write a letter once in a while, catch up for a coffee or they may have no contact at all. I guess it will be up to them and what they feel comfortable with.

I asked my 5 year old daughter how she felt about mummy giving eggs to Sue and Doug and how they have Caitlin and now another baby in Sue's tummy (she's 25 weeks and doing well). She said, "That's good because Caitlin will have a sister to play with." Although a bit presumptuous about the sex she was quite matter of fact about it. She then asked if I'd had too many eggs. I explained I had some eggs that I didn't need any more so I gave some to Sue because she needed them. She then asked "Did Sue's eggs crack?" I had to laugh as it was almost the same response as my son had said at the same age.

Because the kids have known all about the egg donation from the start and it is discussed as a normal conversation, it is no big deal for them. As they get older they will continue to hear about Caitlin and the new baby; there will never be any secrecy surrounding this relationship as I believe that's what brings about problems.

Sue has a photo of me and of the family in Caitlin's baby album and on her bedroom shelf. Caitlin will always know who I am so it shouldn't be a big surprise or secret to learn about when she is older.

I do expect at some stage in the future Sue and Doug's children may have some questions they want answered by their biological mother and it's good for them to know that I am only a phone call away. As my life is so full with my own family and work I have not had a big opportunity to meet up with Sue and Doug but we keep in contact by phone and we hope to catch up again in the future.

My experience as a known egg donor has been very positive. Along the way we have realised the many benefits of known donation, simple things such as:-

1. Sue rang to ask me if my children had adverse reactions to childhood vaccinations.
2. Questions about eczema as both my children and Caitlin have had similar reactions to various foods.
3. And we both have easy access if we need to pass on any new information regarding family illnesses, etc.

Sue can call me at anytime to ask questions and get answers immediately. This can often be at stressful times and she does not have to go through any red tape or time delays to get these answers.

We have all been honest with each other and have kept no secrets along the way. I believe this is the key to success. We may come across issues in the future but if we continue to talk about things, be honest and open, I believe all those bridges can be crossed.

This experience has made me realise many things:

1. I did want to feel appreciated and important by the recipient. (I only realised this myself as I started the treatment.)
2. I have a greater appreciation of how privileged I am to have conceived my children so easily and cheaply.
3. When you weigh up the pros and cons of donating it doesn't necessarily work. This is done by the heart not the head.
4. Recipients have so many choices made for them by doctors and specialists, which I still cannot understand and accept. I feel recipients should have more of a say and be able to make their own decisions, e.g. having to wait 6 months for an AIDS test.

5. It doesn't matter how hard you keep a 4 year old from watching you get injected by your husband, he will eventually see it and it won't bother him as much as it bothers you.
6. A 4 year old does understand what mummy is doing regarding donating eggs except he thinks they look like chicken eggs and if you squash mummy's belly the eggs will break.
7. If you miss out on holidaying with friends in Melbourne because you are on an IVF cycle they will come to you!
8. When things get too involved and stressful I should talk to my husband and he makes things look very simple and stress free.
9. You only get out of it what you put into it. I put a lot into it and I got a lot out of it.