

Parentage is about more than DNA

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A woman born of a genetic sperm donation is challenging the law that prevents her from knowing her genetic father's identity. Her court case began in Vancouver on Monday. We don't doubt her sincerity in claiming that finding her genetic father is important to her. But the emphasis on genetic heritage central to her claims and others like it exemplifies a troubling trend that calls for further scrutiny.

The intense focus on genetic origins comes at an odd moment. The certainty with which genetic connections can now be established seems to have increased their importance. DNA testing now provides incontestable proof. But today's science also makes genetic connections look much less important. All humans have 99 per cent of their DNA in common. A parent and child share slightly more, 99.5 per cent.

Olivia Pratten, 28, acknowledges that she has a "dad" who loves and cares about her. But her biological father, "who created half" of who she is, remains a mystery.

Whatever her feelings, it's scientifically wrong to say Ms. Pratten's biological father created half of who she is. It's also wrong in other ways. As in all cases, upbringing and cultural surroundings are largely responsible for who we are.

It sounds as if Ms. Pratten owes much of her personality and identity to her "dad." That's so whether she resembles him or has shaped herself in contrast to him.

She has the right to be wrong in her thinking about her identity. She also has the right to think about her origins by focusing on her genetic make-up. But whether a judge should strike down the current law so as to identify a man who donated sperm anonymously is another question entirely. The judge also must take other viewpoints than Ms. Pratten's into account. So must legislators who eventually study this issue.

We recognize the interest that donor children have in knowing their genetic origins. But is it a right that trumps all others?

The rhetoric of genetic connection risks erasing social bonds between parents and children. It implies that identity results from genetics. And the idea that genetic origin makes people who they are devalues diverse means by which people form families. Consider adoptive parents or parents who conceive through assisted conception. They may be gay or straight. Such parents are not mere caretakers of someone else's genetic heritage. They contribute to their child's identity.

The judge hearing Ms. Pratten's claim must consider the consequences of recognizing a right to know one's genetic parentage.

Overturning donor anonymity would reduce the supply of donor sperm. It would be harder for infertile couples to conceive a child. In the United Kingdom, the supply of donor sperm plummeted after rules prohibited anonymous donations.

And does Ms. Pratten's claim go both ways? Once we elevate genetic connection over social bonds developed over time, why wouldn't a donor have the right to trace his "children" connected to him by DNA?

An ethical assessment of claims by individuals born of anonymously donated genetic material to find their genetic heritage must take account of the potential harms to other people.

A full and fair evaluation of this debate entails recognizing the multiple interests it engages. People will weight these interests differently. We think they at least belong on the table.

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