SPERM DONORS ANONYMOUS

PRESS KIT

A SENSIBLE FILMS PRODUCTION FOR ABC TELEVISION

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A cautionary and inspiring tale about the secrets surrounding sperm donation.

**ONE LINE SYNOPSIS**

*Sperm Donors Anonymous* is a cautionary and inspiring tale about the effects of anonymous sperm donation on donor-conceived children, their families and on the sperm donors themselves.

**ONE PARAGRAPH SYNOPSIS**

Myf, Michael, Jeff and Ross were conceived in the 1970s using anonymous donor sperm. All four grew up thinking their dad was their biological father, only to discover in adulthood they were donor-conceived. Sharing a desire to uncover the truth about their donor father and their genetic heritage, their search for answers is hampered by old promises to donors that they would remain anonymous. Faced with this obstacle, they are inventive in their efforts to find out what they can, and searching yields some very surprising results. *Sperm Donors Anonymous* lifts the lid on donor anonymity, looks at the effects on the donor-conceived, their families, and on the sperm donors themselves - and shows what is possible when the truth is told.
ONE PAGE SYNOPSIS

Myf, Michael, Jeff and Ross were conceived in the 1970s using anonymous donor sperm. All four grew up thinking their biological father was their dad, only to discover in adulthood they were donor-conceived. Sharing a desire to uncover the truth about their donor father and their genetic heritage, their search for answers is hampered by old promises to donors that they would remain anonymous.

The 1970s saw major advances in the technology to freeze and store sperm. Men were paid to donate sperm to infertile couples on the understanding their identity would remain secret. These men often don’t know how many babies they fathered. And in many cases, their offspring have been kept in the dark about how they were conceived.

40 year old cabaret performer and songwriter Michael Griffiths discovered he was donor-conceived twelve years ago while reading his mother’s unpublished autobiography. Wanting to make sense of his true identity, Michael starts his search in Adelaide where he was conceived. He finds out that donor identity records were destroyed, but a subsequent newspaper article leads him closer to the truth.

Myf Cummerford’s story is legendary in donor-conceived circles as she found her donor father through a newspaper article in 2001. Myf has established a good relationship with donor Michael Linden, as they were both open to contact and interested in getting to know one another. Now that Myf is a mother herself with two small children, she and Michael find new connections as Myf’s babies grow.

Five years ago. Ross Hunter, a 37 year old Melbourne school teacher found out he was donor-conceived as his father was dying of Alzheimer’s. Wanting to know more about his sperm donor father, he hits a roadblock when he discovers his donor files are locked away in the Public Records Office. Ross seeks out fertility doctors, writes letters to possible sperm donors and goes on radio to make his search public.

Music producer Jeff Springfield seeks the help from fertility clinic Monash IVF, as they still have his conception records. Monash know the donor’s name, but are unable to share it with Jeff unless the donor consents. Instead, Monash will attempt to track down the donor using the little information they have, and if they find him, they will ask him if he is open to contact.

But it is not only donor-conceived children who experience ramifications from the use of anonymous sperm donations. Sperm donors, like Ian Smith, are interested in their biological offspring and open to contact. Knowing he has fathered seven children, Ian is haunted by the likelihood he will never meet them. Also deeply affected is Myf’s dad, Simon, the father who raised her. Simon speaks about the hurt that secrecy caused him as the kids were growing up.

Sperm Donors Anonymous lifts the lid on donor anonymity, looks at the effects on the donor-conceived, their families, and on the sperm donors themselves - and shows what is possible when the truth is told. It examines a significant moral dilemma for our time, an era where new fertility technologies lead the way in creating babies. And most importantly, it allows Myf, Jeff, Michael and Ross to share their struggles and joys as they each grapple with a whole new identity.
BACKGROUND

Australia was one of the first countries in the world to recognise that people conceived from donor sperm and eggs are entitled to know their genetic origins. However, the ability to access information differs across the country, and there is no national DNA database to assist in matching children and donors. Worldwide, a small number of countries have moved to recognise the right to information for donor-conceived people.

In the early 1970s, the technology to freeze sperm dramatically improved and the use of sperm donation to achieve conception became more widespread. It is estimated that between 20,000 and 60,000 donor-conceived people live in Australia, yet, according to Louise Johnson of the Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority (VARTA), most do not know that they are donor-conceived. This information was never included on birth certificates, and in the 1970s and 80s, parents were encouraged by their fertility doctors not to tell their children about their origins.

During this period, Victoria was one of the leading international sites for the development of assisted reproductive technologies such as IVF. It was also the first Australian state, and the first jurisdiction in the world to enact legislation regulating assisted reproductive treatment. This legislation – the Infertility Medical Procedures Act – came into effect in 1988.

Prior to 1988, donor-conception was unregulated and was entirely in the hands of the medical profession. A culture of secrecy existed. Donors and recipient parents were required to sign anonymity contracts agreeing not to seek each other’s identity.

Recent changes to legislation in Victoria gives donor-conceived adults greater access to relevant files and services to assist in their search for their donors and potential half siblings. Files that have been locked away for almost forty years will be opened again. This makes the State’s laws on donor conception the most advanced in Australia. In the other states, the law varies. Neither Tasmania nor South Australia has a volunteer register, and in some places, many records have been destroyed. In South Australia, clinics such as Repromed and Flinders Fertility report that donor identity records have been destroyed.

Some clinics including Victoria’s Monash IVF, have kept records and are able to assist donor-conceived adults to trace and make contact with their donor. However, for other clinics – particularly in other states of Australia – there is some reluctance from the clinics to allow identifying information about donors to be released when they were originally promised anonymity. One doctor at a recent NSW Parliamentary Enquiry said some doctors might burn records if they were ordered to release them. But as many sperm donors from the 1970s and 80s have said, they were never given any choice on this issue. Many now say they are happy for identifying information to be given to their offspring.
DID YOU KNOW?

It is estimated between 20,000 and 60,000 donor-conceived people live in Australia.

It is estimated up to 90% of donor conceived people are not aware they are donor-conceived.

In 1988, Victoria was the first Australian state and the first jurisdiction in the world to establish a Central Register where information about Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) procedures, including identifying information about all parties involved in donor conception, is recorded.

In 2011, almost 4% of births in Australia resulted from ART.

Approximately 5% of ART procedures in Australia involve the use of donor sperm, eggs or embryos.

The use of donor sperm to conceive has a long history, dating as far back as the 1800s.

In Australia and New Zealand, anonymous gamete donation is banned. Since 2005, the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines state donor-conceived people have the right to access identifying information about their donor, and fertility clinics are required to maintain records of all parties involved in donor procedures.

However, to date, only three Australian states – Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia – have established central state-administered registers with identifying information about donors, recipients and children born as a result of donor procedures to allow the parties to seek information about each other.

Some European countries, including Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom (UK) and Finland, have also banned anonymous gamete donation. Sweden was the first country in the world to abolish anonymous sperm donation in 1985.

Changes in donor anonymity legislation have not resulted in a decline in the number of men willing to donate sperm.
DOUCMENTARY PARTICIPANTS

“At no point did I feel like I’m searching for another Dad...I had a Dad and he loved me – but I am looking for someone that I am genetically related to.”

Ross Hunter
Melbourne secondary school teacher Ross Hunter (37) is married with two kids. Five years ago, when his father was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s, Ross feared he and his family might have a genetic predisposition to the disease. Wishing to put his mind at ease during such a difficult time, it was at this moment Ross’ mother revealed that his dad was not his biological father.

The revelation shook him to the core, as he had suspected something was not right for some time, but had never imagined the truth. As a means of making sense of his situation - as well as helping others who shared his plight - Ross has become an active member in a donor conceived support group, and speaks publicly about his own personal experiences.

“It’s not just about finding the dude that did a little generous deed. It’s about this picture that I’m a part of that goes far beyond just that.”

Michael Griffiths
40 year old Michael Griffiths has been a music theatre and cabaret performer for all his adult life. He has starred in critically acclaimed musicals like Jersey Boys and Priscilla, as well as singing and playing piano in one man cabaret shows. His shows are based on covers of artists such as Annie Lennox and Madonna. However, Michael’s most recent show is Adolescent, an autobiographical piece that touches on his donor-conceived status and includes the original song called ‘Resemblance’, as seen in the documentary.

Michael discovered he was donor-conceived by accident twelve years ago, when reading through his Mum’s autobiography. He is on a journey to make peace with the truth about his conception and to find out who his donor is.

Michael was conceived in Adelaide in the early days of sperm donation. South Australia has different laws to Victoria on donor anonymity, and it is much more difficult to uncover information about your donor as records were deliberately destroyed. In Michael’s case, his search verges on being nearly impossible.
“I gotta own the rights to my own genetic information.”

Jeff Springfield
36 year old Jeff is a music producer living in the Dandenong Mountains, in outer Melbourne where he runs a small recording studio. Jeff is warm and engaging, with a wry sense of humour, often cracking jokes about his situation.

Jeff’s two younger sisters – Kylie and Kimberley – are also donor-conceived, but from a different donor. They all found out about their donor-conceived status through a family member just a few years ago.

Jeff attends the donor-conceived support group with his sisters, and it is here he meets others like Ross, Michael and Myf. At meetings, Jeff is adamant donor-conceived people should have the rights to their records. Jeff describes how finding out affected him and it changed the way he thought about his identity - “My identity is not what I thought it was.”

“I saw this picture of this young guy with long, blonde hair like I had at the time, and I remember seeing this picture and thinking “Holy shit! Holy shit, that’s me.”

Myf Cummerford
35 year old Myf Cummerford lives in the Dandenong Mountains with her husband and two children. Within the donor-conceived community, Myf’s story of finding her donor father has become legend. After being told in her early 20s by her mum she was donor-conceived, Myf immediately wanted to know more about her biological father. But she was told this was not possible, and that she had no right to do so.

Desperate for more information, Myf attended the first ever conference for donor-conceived people in Sydney. As part of the publicity for the conference, her story and photo were published in a newspaper profile. This led to Myf’s donor – Michael Linden – seeing her photo and feeling instant recognition. Shortly afterwards, the two met and have since become very close. This tight-knit relationship has been fostered through Michael’s support of Myf during the aftermath of her mother’s death, which occurred around the time they first met.

Myf’s family story is complicated and full of challenges. Though it has become much easier, even today she needs to be sensitive to the feelings of both her social dad Simon and donor father Michael. It isn’t always smooth sailing but as Myf says: “Some families are just more complicated.”
“Altruism was my motivator. I wanted to help people who wished to have children but could not. I saw that I could help. It seemed very simple then. Now, I see that it is not simple at all.”

Ian Smith

60 year old Ian Smith donated sperm anonymously at Prince Henry’s hospital in Melbourne during the late 1980’s. At the time, anonymity was just a given. Like many others, Ian did not become aware of the ramifications of donating sperm until years later, after he had his own family.

Ian has two children of his own, and seven “donated” offspring, all now adults, none of whom he has met. Ian wonders about his offspring often and hopes they have happy, healthy lives and are well cared for and loved. “Although these seven people carry a part of me, my genetics and my family, I may never know them - or they, me. I find that profoundly sad.”

Ian joined the Voluntary Register of former donors. “I’m here, and open to and welcoming of connection. One day, maybe, I will look into the eyes of my unknown offspring.” His offspring are between the ages of 22 – 27.

Ian convenes MADmen, the Melbourne Anonymous Donors group, that comprises of sperm donors from the 70s and 80s who no longer wish to remain anonymous.

NARRATOR

Catherine McClements

Catherine McClements has recently wrapped on the ABC series, The Beautiful Lie, directed by Glendyn Ivin and Peter Salmon. She has most recently been seen in the ABC series The Time of Our Lives, alongside William McInnes and Claudia Karvan and also appeared in the ABC telemovie, The Broken Shore. Her other most recent television credits include Foxtel series Wentworth, Network Ten’s drama series Rush and Showtime’s Tangle. Her performance in Tangle earned her the 2010 AFI Award for Best Actress in a Television Drama, two ASTRA Awards for Most Outstanding Performance by an Actress in 2011 and 2013, and a Silver Logie Award nomination for Most Outstanding Actress in 2013.

Catherine’s other television credits include The Pacific, Crashburn, The Secret Life Of Us, Water Rats, Waiting at the Royals, Call Me Mum, GP, Tomorrow’s End, Go For It, My Brother Tom and Right From Day One, and the telemovies After the Deluge, Mary Bryant and The Falls. Her performance in Water Rats earned her a Silver Logie Award for Most Outstanding Actress while her guest role in The Secret Life of Us saw her awarded the AFI Award for Best Actress in a Guest Role in a TV Drama Series.

Catherine received an AFI Award for Best Actress in her feature film debut, Weekend with Kate, directed by Arch Nicholson. She has also appeared in Floodhouse, Jonathan Teplitzky’s Better than Sex, The Right Hand Man, Struck by Lightening, Just Us and Redheads for which she was voted Best Supporting Actress at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival in Japan. She was recently seen in David Parker’s feature The Menkoff Method.
On stage, to name a few, Catherine’s credits include Peter Evan’s *Phèdre* for Bell Shakespeare; *The Other Place, Cruel And Tender* and *Angels In America* for the Melbourne Theatre Company; *The Crucible* for the Sydney Theatre Company; *White Rabbit Red Rabbit* and Neil Armfield’s *It Just Stopped* for Belvoir Street and Malthouse Theatre; *Suddenly Last Summer, The Blind Giant Is Dancing*, Michael Kantor’s *Macbeth* and Benedict Andrews’ *Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* for Belvoir Street Theatre; She received a Green Room Award nomination for Best Female Actor for her role in *Angels In America* and for her performance in *Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* she was nominated for a Helpmann Award for Best Actress in a Play.

**THE DIRECTOR’S STORY by Lucy Paplinska**

One of the most difficult things you face when developing documentary ideas is finding participants. When producer Lisa Horler and I started the research for *Sperm Donors Anonymous*, I was immediately struck by how many people approached us wanting to share their experiences of being conceived through anonymous sperm donation.

I sensed that this topic was very raw, and that it brought up issues around identity and how we think about starting a family – as well as the rights of our children to genetic information. I knew that this was a very important story to be told, and it would resonate with the wider community. I wanted to help the donor-conceived to have a voice. From the beginning I instinctively felt that anonymous gamete donation was not the right way to create families, and as I dug deeper the more I became convinced of this.

I could acutely sense the complexity – and the pain - of the participants’ situation, and it was the story’s many layers that I wanted to convey to the audience. This meant going further afield than just the stories of donor-conceived people, but also speaking to their parents and sperm donors as well. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, a lot of parents understandably did not feel comfortable to participate in the documentary. Therefore, when Myf’s dad Simon decided to be a part of the film and tell his story for the first time, I felt very honoured and knew we had captured an important insight.

I also felt it was very important to include the perspective of the sperm donors, as without them I wouldn’t be able to show the whole picture. I found filming the sperm donors’ meeting to be fascinating. Seeing them all bound together by their common experience of having donated anonymously, and learning from their different views on the situation was very enlightening. I discovered with the sperm donors who were interested in their offspring, their experiences often mirrored those of the donor-conceived adults – finding out any information about their biological relatives was extremely difficult, if not impossible. For me, the landscape of the documentary was laden with sorrow—parents, donor-conceived and donors. Few had ever received adequate counseling and support in coping with this difficult situation. Ultimately, I hope this documentary makes it easier for parents to seek help in coming forward and telling their children they are donor-conceived, as most of them still do not know.
One of the other challenges the film presented was dealing with the bureaucracy surrounding donor-conception - the differing laws and various ways clinics were dealing with donor-conception, not to mention the obstacles presented by the destruction of records. Finding out anything at all – if records existed, who could access them, etc – was incredibly difficult and slow going and it really made me appreciate what donor-conceived people went through to find out any information about their genetic heritage.

One of the highlights of the film for me was being able to be there when one of our participants, Michael Griffiths, found out the DNA test he had completed with a donor (who had come forward after seeing a photo of him in the paper) was a match. This was a completely unexpected and incredible turn of events, and one I never thought would happen due to the destruction of records in Michael’s case. I will never forget how that moment felt, sitting in Michael’s kitchen feeling overwhelmed as I heard him get the news. I feel extremely happy we were able to document this happy situation for Michael.

However, Michael’s story made me feel even more deeply for those whom a happy outcome was not possible at this point. Jeff’s sister Kimberley, whose donor was approached on numerous occasions by Monash IVF, never responded. By this point, I feel very strongly that donor conception laws should be more in line with adoption laws in Victoria – ie. that all parties have the right to identifying information about their biological relatives. I feel that the situation is incredibly unjust - that whilst many donor-conceived people are not after a relationship with their donor, they are powerless to get any information at all (ie. medical, genetic) unless the donor is asked for permission. In most cases, it is the right to the information that donor-conceived people are passionate about, and they would never seek a relationship with someone who was not interested.

I hope we have been able to show the fallout of the decision to use anonymous sperm and how it has affected everyone involved. It is my wish that it makes people think twice about using anonymous gamete donation to create their families.

LUCY PAPLINSKA
JUNE 2015
I first became interested in the stories of donor-conceived people when learning about the story of Narelle Grech. Narelle was a donor-conceived adult in Melbourne who was dying of bowel cancer. She spoke about her desire, her need and her right to information about her biological father. Her struggle and final meeting with her biological father inspired me to research this subject for a documentary.

Working on this film over the past two years, the topic has never ceased to be interesting. The combination of themes – secrets in families, mystery surrounding anonymous sperm donors, and the incredible community of donor-conceived folks who were fighting to have their voices heard – all interact to tell an astonishing story.

My first phone call was to the Victorian Assistive Reproductive Technology Association (VARTA). Social worker, Kate Bourne, facilitated the donor-conceived support group and she was able to put us in touch with a group of people eager to tell their stories.

The first time director Lucy Paplinska and I organized to meet a group of possible participants for the film, three sperm donors turned up with two donor-conceived adults. I was struck by how the donors and the children, although not related, all shared a common interest. They were joined together by a sense of injustice, and they were all determined that donor-conceived folk should have the right to information about their genetic heritage. The sperm donors – Ian Smith, Michael Linden and Peter Liston – revealed a side of the story I hadn’t heard before. Here were guys who donated sperm years ago, who were expressing interest in their “offspring”, their unknown children. It opened my eyes to their strong feelings of responsibility towards the children they had helped to create. The myth of the anonymous sperm donor, a mysterious figure people snigger about, became a silly stereotype in my mind, and I was determined to include this aspect in the documentary.

There is a question people often ask in relation to this film – “How many donors are open to contact?” It’s a hard question to answer as the research done to date isn’t representative enough. However, it is obvious many donors are open to contact, and one thing this documentary should do is explode the myth that all donors want to remain anonymous.

We were fortunate two of our donor-conceived participants were able to locate their donors during the course of filming. This was unexpected, particularly for Michael Griffiths. Michael’s story was designed to show how difficult the situation is in South Australia as records have been destroyed, and there isn’t a voluntary register, or a service set up to help people. However, in every step of Michael’s search, he got closer to finding his donor, and in the end he got lucky! I was able to meet Michael’s donor before the DNA test was conducted, and to see him grappling with what was about to unfold. It showed me how difficult it can be for a sperm donor to come to terms with his past actions, but also how an open heart is a very powerful remedy in dealing with this situation.
I am interested in telling stories about subjects that people find hard to talk about, and sperm donation is one of them. It’s a topic that people either cringe about, or make jokes about. I even found that SPERM is a word that people genuinely don’t like. Calling the film Sperm Donors Anonymous is in reaction to that, and my hope is the film will create an opportunity to get people talking about this sensitive topic, and to embrace its complexity.

LISA HORLER
JUNE 2015

THE PRODUCTION TEAM

DIRECTOR LUCY PAPLINSKA

Lucy Paplinska was born in Warsaw, Poland, and is an award-winning documentary writer and director. Since beginning her filmmaking career in Melbourne in 1997, Lucy has directed a number of highly intimate and personal documentaries. Her films explore larger issues that everyone can relate to, as they focus on recurring themes like identity, concepts of family, mental health and making sense of life’s struggles.

In 2002, Lucy completed the Postgraduate Diploma of Film and Television (Documentary) at the Victorian College of the Arts. Her first film, Deep Waters, was her major production at the VCA where it was nominated for Best Documentary before it won a Film Victoria script award. It won Best Student Documentary at the Iowa City International Documentary Film Festival, was nominated for Best Documentary at the Dahlonega International Film Festival and was a finalist in the 2003 ATOM Awards.

The following year, Lucy directed The Company You Keep, an episode for ABC TV’s documentary series Family Story. This film told the story of a family struggling with mental illness, and screened as part of The Other Film Festival in 2005. In 2010, Lucy completed Alone In A Crowded Room, which tells the stories of four adults with autism. The documentary screened on Compass (ABC TV), and was a resounding ratings success.

Currently, Lucy divides her time between directing and editing films and television projects.
PRODUCER LISA HORLER

Lisa Horler is an experienced producer of television documentary and digital media. In 2014, she teamed up with producer John Moore to become a part of Sensible Films.

Through her company Licketty Split, Lisa has produced and directed documentary programs like Levantes (1998, SBS), From Here to Ithaca (2002, SBS) and Made in Heaven (2005, ABC) that aired on Australian television. These documentaries explored the experience of migration from multiple perspectives. In 2009, Lisa produced Alone In A Crowded Room, a documentary about adults with autism that screened on Compass (ABC1), directed by Lucy Paplinska.

Lisa also worked for many years as a freelance producer, and produced or line produced many documentaries when working for 360 Degree Films and John Moore Productions, including Monash: the Forgotten Anzac (2008, ABC), Menzies And Churchill At War (2008, ABC), The Trial (2009, SBS), Charles Bean’s Great War (2010, Foxtel), and Gallipoli From Above (2012, Foxtel).

Lisa’s current slate of projects includes producing the feature documentary Freedom Stories with director Steve Thomas. Freedom Stories premiered in June 2015 at the Sydney Film Festival and tells the extraordinary stories of twelve former asylum seekers who are now Australian citizens.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JOHN MOORE

John Moore is one of Australia’s leading documentary producers and has been in the entertainment industry for over 35 years. His many film awards include best documentary at the Melbourne and Sydney Film Festivals for Black Man’s Houses (1993), and the NSW Premier’s History Award for Thomson of Arnhem Land (2001). Abortion, Corruption & Cops was nominated for the Sydney Film Festival Dendy Awards in 2006, and the docu-dramas Menzies & Churchill at War and Monash were ratings winners on ABC TV in 2008. His recent program Gallipoli From Above screened on ABC TV on the Centenary of Anzac Day in April 2015. He is currently producing the feature documentary Putuparri And The Rainmakers that will premiere at MIFF in August 2015.
ABOUT SENSIBLE FILMS

Sensible Films is an award-winning Australian production company dedicated to making film and television projects that attempt to make sense of the world and its history. That doesn’t mean films that are necessarily dry and intellectual because understanding is as much an emotional as well as a mental experience. In fact, the real objective of Sensible Films is to make films that move people because of their appeal to the intellect, not in spite of it.

Sensible Films is owned and run by producers John Moore and Lisa Horler. Telling stories that are intimate and personal, like Alone In A Crowded Room (2010), a wonderful insight into the world of autism, as well as narratives about national identity, like Gallipoli From Above (2012), a docu-drama that dispels many of the myths about the Gallipoli landings. Sensible is currently releasing Sperm Donors Anonymous and also the feature documentary Putuparri And The Rainmakers.

Putuparri And The Rainmakers is about a community’s epic struggle for cultural survival in the remote Kimberley outback and it will premiere at the Melbourne International Film.

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USEFUL LINKS

http://www.varta.org.au

VARTA
The Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority (VARTA) undertakes public education relating to the best interests of children and families created with the help of donor conception. Their website contains useful resources, publications and podcasts.

http://www.areyouдонorconceived.org

ARE YOU DONOR CONCEIVED aka RUDC
RUDC is an organisation set up and run by donor-conceived adults in Australia. RUDC is about creating a place of information, solace and support for the DC community, as well as creating awareness amongst the wider public that donor-conceived people exist and are still being discriminated against in social, legal and medical ways.