

'Ban DNA family searches to protect sperm donors'

Mark Bridge Technology Correspondent

Genetic matching services such as AncestryDNA should be shut down because they threaten the anonymity of sperm donors, an academic says.

Guido Pennings, a professor of bioethics at Ghent University, said that donors who gave sperm on condition of anonymity were at risk of harm from the "exponential growth" of DNA services. This includes Britons who gave sperm before April 1, 2005, who understood that children conceived as a result would not be entitled to identifying information about them.

The professor described donor-con-

ceived people who used the services to search for relatives as "disrespectful", a claim that was criticised as offensive.

Companies such as Ancestry and 23andMe have built DNA databases of millions of people who pay less than £100 to view ethnicity breakdowns or search for relatives. Britons commonly find details of hundreds of fourth cousins or closer relatives.

Even if sperm donors don't take genetic tests, experts say that the likelihood of their offspring identifying other biological relatives in the companies' databases is increasing. This can lead to identification of the donor when the donor's siblings or other children

are on the databases, for example. Donors may also be traced when more distant relatives are on the databases.

In a paper in *Human Reproduction*, Professor Pennings wrote: "Users violate a person's privacy when they identify and/or contact a person who is not registered on the database. This is especially wrong for gamete donors since they have been promised anonymity and are betrayed by the searches. People ... who use ancestry databases to find a donor show disrespect and lack of gratitude."

He added: "Donor siblings may be contacted while they may be unaware of their donor conception. Some people

searching for genetic relatives demonstrate a complete disregard for the possible impact of their search on other people." The easiest way for countries to proceed to protect people was to "limit access ... To put it bluntly, it should be forbidden to offer these services."

Debbie Kennett, a genealogist and honorary research associate at UCL, said that Professor Pennings's characterisations of donor-conceived children were "grossly offensive" and his research "fails to recognise the rights of donor-conceived individuals".

Nina Barnsley, of the Donor Conception Network, which supports the families of children conceived with donated

egg, sperm and embryos, said that the rights of donor-conceived people "don't even feature" in Professor Pennings's paper. *The Times* reported last year on Ivo van Halen, a donor-conceived IT worker from the Netherlands who identified his biological father and 57 half-siblings through DNA.

Responding to Ms Kennett's criticism, Professor Pennings said he was referring to a small minority who used DNA services in the knowledge that they could cause others hurt.

Ancestry and 23andMe declined to comment on Professor Pennings's research. Both companies say that protecting customers' privacy is a priority.