Donor children must not be forgotten

By Melinda Tankard Reist,
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http://melindatankardreist.com/
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Narelle Grech fought to find her donor dad. Picture: Ellen Smith Herald Sun

WHEN Lauren Burns listened to the Prime Minister's national apology to those who suffered forcible adoption, she wanted to ask: what about me?

It wasn't that the 29-year-old Melbourne woman didn't find the speech moving. She believes the mothers and children so cruelly separated deserved the apology. But she, and so many like her, felt left out. Lauren is one of thousands of children (exact figures are not known - in the beginning records weren't kept) born as the result of donor sperm or eggs, who believe they too have been denied an opportunity to know their biological parents.

It was these words which most affected her: "To each of you who were . . . denied the opportunity to grow up with your family and community of origin, we say sorry. We acknowledge that many of you still experience a constant struggle with identity, uncertainty and loss and feel a persistent tension between loyalty to one family and yearning for another."

"I found it incredible that the Government was apologising to adopted people for the very things that are still happening via donor conception and surrogacy," Lauren says.

"It was frustrating that almost nobody except us could see that by simply inserting 'donor conception' for 'adoption', the PM could have been speaking to us. She promised no generation of Australians would suffer the same pain and trauma they did. But it's not true."
Many donor-conceived children feel they are treated as inferior citizens, especially when secrets continue to be legally protected. There are no uniform regulations in Australia. In Victoria you're guaranteed access to your donor's identity only if you were born after 1998. Those born from 1988 to 1998 get access only if the donor consents. The rest have little hope. All they can do is put their names on a voluntary register and hope their donor does too.

Melbourne father Ross, 35, (surname withheld by request) describes an "enduring yearning" to know his genetic father. "I know how tall he was, his eye and hair colour, complexion and blood type. A pretty lousy list when you consider what a father has the potential to be. But at the moment, it's all I have," he says.

Some think that's enough. Dr Doug Keeping of the Queensland Fertility Group says: "The code of secrecy has worked well for 25 years. Why spoil it for fairly theoretical reasons?" Donor offspring don't think their reasons for wanting to know their biological parents are theoretical.

Lauren says: "There is a commonly held belief that since we were so wanted by our social parents, our biological kinship links shouldn't matter. But there is still a loss experienced from not knowing biological family and not being able to trace where your looks, personality or interests come from."

Ross describes the battle of the donor conception community against the profitable reproductive technology industry as being like an "anchovy against a whale."

Lauren says she knows of a donor-conceived man who felt so much like a product he had a bar code tattooed on the back of his neck. And how is someone conceived from an egg donated in Eastern Europe, sperm donated in the US and born to an Indian surrogate mother supposed to find all the people involved in creating them?

Lauren found her father three years ago after a five year search. Holders of her records refused to hand them over because of legal advice. With the intervention of the then Victorian Governor, David de Kretser, (her mother's treating doctor), her donor was found. While Lauren still has time to develop the relationship, a friend had merely four weeks.

Lauren and other donor-conceived offspring are grieving the loss of Melbourne social worker Narelle Grech, who died this week of cancer, aged 30. An advocate for retrospective rights to information about their biological identity, she was denied information about her biological father, Ray Tonna, for whom she searched for 15 years. But because she was dying, former Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu intervened and her father was found. Tonna and son Zac found and lost a daughter and sister in the space of a month.

The co-ordinator of the Donor Conception Support Group, Caroline Lorbach, says she is sad and angry the system made Grech fight for information which should have been hers. The group is waiting for Victoria's response to the Parliamentary Law Reform Committee 2012 report's recommendation that all donor-conceived people know the name of their donor, no matter when they were born. "I hope the Government decides it needs to open up all the records so that no one else has to go through what Narelle did," Lorbach says. If we acknowledge the pain of those forcibly removed from parents, then the pain of these children must be acknowledged also.