

FAMILIES OF STRANGERS? SOCIO-LEGAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION IN DONOR-LINKED FAMILIES

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Hundreds of thousands of people globally, including approximately 60,000 Australians, have been conceived with donated gametes, most at a time when donations were anonymous. Over the past two decades, there has been growing international debate about the potentially harmful effects of secrecy in donor conceived families.

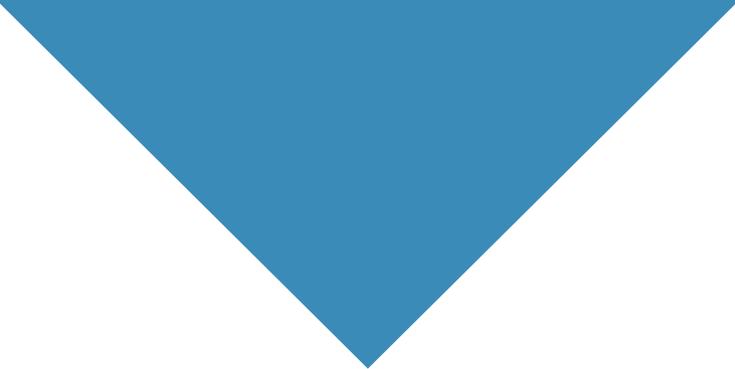
It is increasingly asserted that knowledge of one's genetic origins is constitutive of identity and emotionally important to people born of donated gametes (Turner, 2000; Blyth, 2012).

Donor linking – when donor-conceived people, donors and recipient parents access each other's identity – is a controversial legislative and policy response to concerns about the wellbeing of donor-conceived children and adults. Australia has emerged as a world leader in providing statutory donor linking services, with three states allowing prospective donor linking through government supported registers. In 2015, Victoria became the first jurisdiction in the world to provide retrospective access to anonymous donor records (Kelly & Dempsey, 2016).

At the same time, non-statutory linking - where individuals use online registers, social media, direct-to-consumer genetic testing, and direct approaches to fertility clinic staff - is increasingly common even where statutory linking is available (Dempsey & Kelly 2017; Crawshaw et al. 2015).

Some commentators have even proclaimed the 'end of anonymity' (e.g. Harper & Kennett 2016) in the era of genetic testing. It is now possible for parents who have conceived using anonymous sperm donation or people who suspect they might be donor conceived to search for genetic relatives using a DNA test. Others discover they are donor conceived through the use of these tests. In this context, it is increasingly difficult for sperm banks to promise donors anonymity, or for parents to maintain secrecy around their use of donated gametes. However, the potential relational and legal consequences of the 'end to anonymity' claim also warrant social research scrutiny (see Zadeh, 2016).

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The workshop will explore the relatively under researched phenomenon of donor linking, bringing together Australian and international early career researchers and established scholars from law, sociology, psychology, gender studies and health sciences, as well as law and policy makers.

The range of participants will ensure a diversity of perspectives and an emphasis on the development of evidence-based policy and legal recommendations. Participation of both scholarly experts and practitioners working in the field will enable debate across the silos of industry, academia, government, and stakeholder communities. The workshop will also be an important research dissemination activity for the Australian Research Council funded project 'Families of Strangers? The socio-legal impact of donor linking in Australia' (DP180100188), led by CIs Kelly and Dempsey which involves senior and early career researchers. (<https://familiesofstrangers.com/>)

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Additionally, it will be a vehicle for discussion of other research funded through national competitive programs such as Economic and Social Research Council (UK) (led by Prof Damien Riggs) and the National Science Foundation (US) (led by Prof Rosanna Hertz).

The aim of this international workshop on donor linking will be to consider the relational impact on members of the donor conception communities of statutory and non-statutory linking, as well as the increasingly important role of technological innovations such as social media and direct to consumer genetic testing on donor linking practices.

The event objectives will be to:

1. generate new internationally comparative knowledge about how donor linking affects different family types (single parent, same sex and gender diverse, heterosexual);
 2. weigh up the relevance of this for different regulatory frameworks and cultural contexts;
 3. formulate proposed changes or additions to Australian law and policy in light of the social science research evidence.
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