

I couldn't be a mother... until I went to Spain

As more and more hopeful parents are forced abroad to seek donor eggs, Victoria Macdonald recalls the agony and joy of her IVF quest .

By Victoria Macdonald

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In a coffee shop the other day, a woman came over to tell me, at some length, just how cute my baby daughter is. Of course, I was hardly likely to disagree, but after a while the woman straightened up, looked long and hard at me and said: "So, does she take after her father, then?"

Later that week I was telling a friend just how determined Gabriella was becoming. My friend laughed and said: "Well, we know who she gets that from."



Happy ending: Victoria Macdonald, now 48, with Gabriella; how 'The Sunday Telegraph' reported the problems faced by Britons seeking donor eggs

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There was an awkward pause. Because Gabriella does not get that from me. And, yes, she does look a lot like her father and not one bit like me. She has brown hair with a hint of red, chubby little cheeks, a perky nose and elegant long fingers. I do not.

But then it is not surprising we are so different in appearance. Although I carried her through 36 weeks of pregnancy and gave birth this time last year, there is no genetic link between us at all since Gabriella was conceived after we travelled to Spain for a donated egg.

A report in The Sunday Telegraph last week revealed that we are not alone. Increasing numbers of couples are travelling abroad because there is a national shortage of donor eggs in Britain, largely caused by the change in law in 2005 that prevents sperm and egg donors from donating anonymously. Quite patently, many otherwise perfectly altruistic people do not fancy the result of their donation turning up on their doorstep 18 years later.

My husband Andrew and I did not take this decision lightly, but, after four failed attempts at IVF, we felt we had no other option. I was 44, the chances of succeeding with my own eggs was down to about five per cent, and each attempt was costing us more than £3,000. We were beginning to face the heartbreaking possibility that we would never be parents.

It was our consultant, Yakoub Khalaf, at Guy's Hospital Assisted Conception Unit, who encouraged us to consider a donor egg. Figures vary, but some suggest it has a success rate of more than 40 per cent. For women over the age of 40, who in general have a lower quality and quantity of eggs, the chances of conceiving with a donor egg are five times higher than with their own eggs. Far better than nature, in other words.

But it very quickly became apparent that we would have to wait up to two years – if not longer – if we tried to find a donor here. We briefly considered asking my younger sister, but it was a solution fraught with problems. For instance, what if I did have a baby and then when she tried and failed, how would she feel? Alternatively, how would she feel if she did not agree with our child-rearing methods? Would she want to intervene?

In the end, we didn't even look for a donor in Britain. We turned to Spain simply because I read an article in a magazine, and our consultant had heard good things about the care there. Donations are anonymous, so there are no waiting lists, and, although the donors are not technically paid, they do receive about 1,000 euros in "expenses".

After a false start with a clinic in Marbella, where they did not come back to us with any timeline, I phoned Institut Marquès, based in a leafy suburb of Barcelona, where we were told they should be able to find a suitable donor within a couple of months. We caught an early-morning flight, had a coffee on the Ramblas, then caught a cab to the clinic. It felt very surreal. Tucked into money belts, we carried nearly 5,000 euros each. I have never been so terrified of pickpockets or muggers, but the clinic gives clients a discount for cash. The 10,000 euros paid for the consultation, the egg retrieval from the donor, her expenses, the first implantation, and the subsequent freezing of the remaining embryos.

At the first appointment, the clinic wanted to know about my general health, and I provided evidence that I did not have any sexually transmitted diseases. My husband left behind sperm to be frozen in preparation for the treatment. But mainly the clinic wanted to meet me so that, when it came to the donor, they could provide as good a match as possible.

Andrew and I had already discussed this at length, and agreed that we would always tell our child how they had been conceived and why it had happened this way, so it was not important whether he or she looked similar. I was much keener that the donor was intelligent in the hope that it would be passed on, but the clinic does not offer that choice.

We then went home and waited – not for long although, of course, it felt like an eternity. A couple of months later, they found a 19-year-old university student with the same colour hair as me, green eyes like both my husband and me, and my height.

At this stage, the treatment is more arduous for the donor than the recipient. The donor had to inject herself or sniff a drug daily to prepare her ovaries, and, when the time comes, have the eggs removed under anaesthetic. I just had to take the contraceptive pill so my cycle was synchronised with hers, and, a few days before treatment, I started using hormone patches. I also had a scan in Britain to check that my uterus was ready for the embryo transfer. Then we flew back to Spain.

The hard part – and it is indescribably hard – is the waiting. Any couple who have been trying to have a baby will know this. Every second, every minute, every hour of the two weeks before you can take the pregnancy test drags by. Every twinge, every mood swing is a sign that it has not worked. We diverted ourselves by travelling to the south of Spain, where we planned to be married on the beach the following year.

But the treatment failed. Five attempts and we were older, poorer and deeply sad. Everything I had planned for my life had always involved having children, and now it looked as if it would never happen. The worst thing was that it was largely because I had left it so late. I am a health correspondent: I knew the statistics. But I did not meet the man I wanted to have children with until I was 39, and, without me knowing, it was already too late.

However, the fact that I am writing this means there is a happy ending. After our wedding, we went back to Barcelona where they had frozen the remaining embryos. The clinic implanted two. It took 15 minutes. We walked back to the

hotel in the sunshine wondering if, this time next year, there would be three of us.

We joke now that it must have worked because we had finally married, that deep down we were more traditional than we knew. But who really knows? Maybe I was more relaxed; perhaps the embryos were better quality. Maybe it was the lovely holiday we gave ourselves as a distraction during the following fortnight.

It was not a miracle, though, as some would like to think. It was technology and us and the donor. And now we have Gabriella Grace, who will be one on Tuesday, and who is cute and funny and a constant joy.

There are parents in the UK who have had children by donor egg or sperm and who abhor people like Andrew and me for going abroad. They believe that a donor child has the right – as with someone adopted – to know precisely where they come from. They were the people driving the campaign to remove the right to anonymity.

I would have had no objection to our child knowing the donor. But their campaign did exactly what we had feared and drove down the numbers. I don't think egg donation is comparable to adoption. This is a random collection of eggs that would have been lost that month if the clinic had not collected them for us. The donor did not go through the pregnancy or the birth. I did.

And, when the time comes, we will tell Gabriella that a kind lady went to a clinic and helped Mummy, who was having trouble getting pregnant.

- Victoria Macdonald is social affairs correspondent for Channel 4 News

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