

The advent of international 'mail-order' oocyte donation

Sir,

We read with great interest the commentary¹ on the disturbing developments in the commercialisation of procreation. Boon Heng has rightly highlighted the very pertinent ethical and legal issues related to 'mail-order' oocyte donation. However, there are at least two other issues of significance that merit attention.

First, patients often express concerns about the possibility of 'gamete mix-up' and measures in place to reduce the risk of such human errors. In the UK, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA)'s expanded sixth edition of the Code of Practice published in 2003 contains sections dedicated to giving guidance on witnessing clinical laboratory procedures,* and these measures can reduce the occurrence of such events. Unfortunately, most European countries do not have a regulatory body. 'Mail-order' oocyte donation poses the real danger of 'gamete mix-up', a topical issue in the UK, which has attracted extensive media attention in recent months. Such a mix-up has occurred in the UK, despite the stringent regulations put in place by the HFEA.

Second, the option or possibility for children born following gamete donation to access information about their genetic parents, and therefore be able to trace them, has been recognised as a 'human right'. This has led to the abolition of statutory guarantees of anonymity of donors as of April 2005 in the UK. In the absence of a dedicated register of donors and recipients in most other European countries, it would be near impossible for the offsprings to trace their genetic parents in years to come. There is therefore an urgent need for the creation and maintenance of enforceable centralised registers, such as that maintained by HFEA, to record licensed treatment services and details of the gamete donors.

*1991–1993, the Committee on Social and Ethical Issues; from 1991 to 1999, social and ethical issues were considered by the Authority as a whole and ad hoc working groups which reported on individual areas of work; in 1999, a standing Ethics Committee was established, which became the Ethics and Law Committee in 2003.

Whatever one's views on the matter, international 'mail-order' oocyte donation is now a reality and is probably to expand. Where this is possible, such as in the European Union, the challenge is for governments to step in and develop enforceable regulations that may minimise the unacceptable exploitation of egg donors in developing countries and provide safety and legal redress where required to the recipients in the developed world.

Without these measures and the others proposed by Boon Heng, it will not be long before we witness the 'amazonisation' of gamete sale on amazon.co.uk or on Ebay. ■

Reference

- 1 Heng B. The advent of international 'mail-order' egg donation. *BJOG* 2006;113:1225–7.

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