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The role of humour in sperm donor recruitment

14 June 2010

By Professor Eric Blyth

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Unlike either [oocyte](#) or [embryo](#) donation, [sperm](#) donation presents a massive PR problem - masturbation. At least since Onan came to a sticky end (1), masturbation (aka 'self-abuse') has both suffered censure and has provided a fertile source for low-grade humour.

Various tactics have been employed to attract men to donate sperm. In jurisdictions where there are no externally-imposed restrictions on the use of enticements, financial inducement seems to work reasonably well and major US sperm banks adopt what may best be described as a casual approach to recruitment. The website of Xytex entices potential donors with the less than eye-catching slogan 'become a sperm donor with Xytex' (2). California Cryobank is a little more imaginative with 'Give the gift of family' (3). The website of Cryos International, which claims to be 'the world's largest international network of sperm banks, [offering] our services to clinics and private customers in more than 60 countries', is the epitome of low-key, providing no obvious indication that it is seeking to recruit donors at all (4).

More brash recruitment efforts have come from elsewhere. In 2005, the Albury Reproductive Medicine clinic in New South Wales, Australia achieved international celebrity (or notoriety) following its advertisement for potential donors in a University of Calgary student magazine to whom it was offering a two-week, all-expenses paid trip down-under (5).

Recent sperm donor recruitment campaigns in the UK have tackled the masturbation 'problem' head on - most notably the National Gamete Donation Trust's (NGDT) 'Give a Toss' campaign (6) (for non-UK readers of this commentary the campaign title cleverly - if not tastefully - played on the twin British slang meanings of 'toss'. First, as a euphemism for 'masturbation' - as in 'have a toss' or to 'toss off' - second, to refer to 'caring', as in the negative rendition of the term 'couldn't give a toss', meaning 'do not care').

The NGDT's latest sperm donor recruitment drive is a Manchester-based campaign 'Sperm Donation - Have you got the Balls' (employing a British euphemism for testicles) (7). The 'Have you got the Balls?' campaign, funded by the Department of Health, appears to be directed at the thousands of young men who support the two local rival Premiership football clubs, Manchester City and Manchester United.

Similar plays on words have been used by [IVF](#) Scotland and Shawfair Hospital in a poster recruitment campaign, two of which say 'You give us your oats, we'll give you your porage' ('oats' providing the basic ingredients for porage, a Scots staple diet, and also a slang term for sexual intercourse), and 'Rise and be a nation again' (a reference to Scottish history as well as - more obviously - to the erect penis). A third poster uses the Lord Kitchener 'Your nation needs you' approach (8). The most recent is graphically illustrated by the newly-instituted London Sperm Bank's phallic logo (9).

In 2009, the Progress Educational Trust applied British humour referring to the recent global financial turmoil with the title of its debate 'Banking Crisis: What Should Be Done About the Sperm Donor Shortage?' - although since pundits have been claiming a crisis in sperm supply for many years (and was there ever a time that service providers said they had sufficient donors?) - the notion of 'crisis' seems somewhat overdone.

It may be argued that concerns regarding the negative consequences of gratuitous prurience in sperm donor recruitment remain unfounded (10) and that the ends simply justify the means. However, if we are to have a reasoned debate, we need to know the impact of these campaigns on donor recruitment.

SOURCES & REFERENCES

[1\) Genesis 38:8-10](#)

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[2\) Xytex](#)

| *17 April 2010*

[3\) California Cryobank](#)

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[4\) Cryos International](#)

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[5\) Sperm donors rush for Australia holiday offer](#)

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[6\) Give a Toss campaign](#)

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[7\) Sperm Donation - Have You Got the Balls?](#)

National Gamete Donation Trust | *17 April 2010*

[8\) Raper, V., Porridge for your Oats](#)

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[9\) London Sperm Bank](#)

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10) Blyth, E. and Ryll, I., Donor recruitment: is 'tackiness' the answer?

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