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Donor recruitment: is "tackiness" the answer?

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In a previous BioNews Commentary, Joanne Adams, Elizabeth Pease and Brian Lieberman wrote of their experiences of recruiting sperm donors following the 2005 legislative change in the UK requiring donors to agree to the disclosure of their identity to any people conceived as a result of their donation. Their account of their success in recruiting donors cast doubt on the repeated claims that the change in law was necessarily responsible for a crisis in donor recruitment in the UK (after all many countries that still protect donor anonymity, such as Canada, also report donor shortages). They also challenged those wishing to provide donor services to change their attitude towards sperm donation.

Whether the change in attitude represented by the latest "Give a Toss" sperm donor recruitment campaign (<http://www.giveatoss.com>) was quite what they had in mind is another matter. Since it was established in 1998, the National Gamete Donation Trust (NGDT) has certainly not had an easy task either in raising awareness of gamete and embryo donation or increasing donor recruitment donors and the free PR, which has enabled the "Give a Toss" campaign to be launched, appears to have been an offer it couldn't refuse.

"Give a Toss" is provocatively tacky, designed to reach the potential sperm donors that other methods have failed to reach, although ironically perpetuating the very stereotype of sperm donation that NGDT was previously keen to dispel (1).

Relying on the tried and tested "sex sells" formula, the campaign website features young women in "We Want Your Sperm"- emblazoned T shirts, encouraging would be donors to practice and improve their "wrist action" on an interactive "Toss-O-Meter" game.

Among some useful facts about sperm and human reproduction, the website imparts further knowledge of the impact of ingesting certain foods on the taste of semen (we haven't tested these recipes, so readers will have to take the campaign's word for it - or try for themselves), although - to misapply an analogy - since you cannot have your cake and eat it, we can't quite see the relevance of semen as a dietary supplement for a campaign for sperm donation.

We could go on, but the two points we want to make here are, first, that we are not humourless

killjoys who can't have a laugh when there is a laugh to be had. The second point, though, is that we think there's a time and a place, and a serious sperm donor recruitment campaign is not the place to employ adolescent humour to disparage sperm donation. One thing the campaign seems unlikely to do is encourage any man to advertise the fact that he donates sperm and so possibly recruit other donors through personal example.

Many people, including ourselves (IR as the mother of three donor conceived children and EB as an academic researcher) - as well as NGDT itself - have been working to change the image of sperm donation for years. We have promoted gamete donation in our own countries as a responsible and respectable activity that affords due respect to donors, to parents who have used donor conception to build their families and to donor-conceived people. In what appears to be a desperate measure to maximize recruitment, this campaign risks not only undermining much of that work but also of disrespecting, distressing and offending donors, people who have used donor conception, and donor-conceived people. Far better, as one young person has suggested to us, to share letters from recipients or donor-conceived people who want to thank their donor. Perhaps some may think that "thank you" letters won't "sell" sperm donation. Alternatively, they may well inspire prospective donors and honour past donors that they are involved in a valued form of family building.

The two Manchester clinics for which Joanne Adams and her colleagues are recruiting donors account for around a quarter of current UK sperm donors. Their approach may not generate the newsworthiness of the "Give a Toss" campaign, but it is delivering the goods while respecting the dignity of all those involved in gamete donation. Self-evidently, if two clinics can make such a difference, their model of donor recruitment can be emulated elsewhere in the UK without resorting to the tawdry message of the "Give a Toss" campaign.

(1) BBC Radio 4 (2006) Woman's Hour. 14 August

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/01/2006_33_mon.shtml

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