



stories | community

ABOUT UWIRE | AFFILIATES | PR | NEWSLETTERS

[register](#) | [forgot password?](#)

The Egg Hunt: Cashing in on college fertility

By Sadia Latifi
 November 21, 2008
 Source: [Columbia Daily Spectator](#), Columbia U.

"Listen, I'll tell you whatever you want, but this absolutely, positively, cannot get back to my parents," Alex Greenbaum tells me at our first meeting. "I mean, it's not like I'm ashamed, but my parents didn't exactly send me to Barnard so I could donate my eggs."

She tells me to create an appropriate pseudonym for her, one that makes sure to capture her "50-percent Jewyness."

"So, what do you want to know?"

How has she been feeling since her egg-removal surgery in September?

She takes a long gulp from her Ethos water bottle and pauses for a few seconds.

"You know, I felt like shit for days," she finally says. "But they were able to extract 10 eggs from me, so the procedure was officially successful, and I don't have any more headaches. I feel physically just fine. And my check just cleared, so that's \$9,000 I can put to post-graduation travel and apartment-hunting."

But how does she feel about her DNA's being used to help a couple produce a baby?

"It's a great feeling," she laughs loudly. "I'm a mom without any of the actual stress of being a mom!" But then she abruptly stops. "Are you looking for a more serious answer? I don't know. I don't know how I feel yet, really."

College females like Alex are regularly offered thousands of dollars to go through a time-consuming, invasive process that helps infertile couples conceive. Egg donation is a popular process that continues to satisfy the desires of both donors and anxious intended parents — and in a troubled economy, interest is rising. More than 14,000 babies are born each year via egg donation.

Aggressive marketing to debt-ridden students and the subsequent commoditization of the egg is leading researchers and specialists to raise concerns about a lack of government regulation and the long-term mental and physical effects of donation.

Whose Eggs?

Alex Greenbaum is beautiful. She's a 5-foot 10-inch, blue-eyed blonde with raised cheekbones and a lean, athletic body. When she arrives 10 minutes late to our second Starbucks interview, she apologizes profusely, pushing long strands of hair away from her face into a ponytail. I'm struck by her sense of style (which she describes as "sorority hipster").

"I gotta check my e-mail for one second. I'm expecting to hear back from a professor about a paper topic. Hang on, if you wouldn't mind."

She whips out her BlackBerry and furiously thumbs her way down a stuffed inbox with curt responses that she reads out loud while she types. I stare at my notebook of questions.

Why does she need the money?

"My parents are great for financial support now, but after graduation, it's over. I'm not studying a viable major so by the time it's May 20, 2009, and I'm making shit per hour, I'm going to be broke. I have loans like everyone else. My parents said they won't pay for my BlackBerry then, either. I may have to say goodbye." She pouts jokingly.

Classified ads for egg donors appear regularly in the Spectator and fliers are posted inside buildings like Barnard Hall and Schermerhorn, seeking out women from specific ethnic backgrounds or with certain physical or academic qualifications. New York City's Craigslist publishes scores of ads each day, and a cursory Google search provides hundreds of links to local "egg brokers." They sometimes promise up to \$25,000 for donated eggs.

It was one of these advertisements that caught Alex's eye and led her to fill out an online questionnaire at a Web site for a Manhattan-based agency that she refuses to name because of contractual obligations.

"It was a Sunday night this summer, and I was procrastinating before work the next day, so I started filling in this huge form that asked about my physical appearance, medical history, even my interests," she says. "By Monday afternoon, I had received a call saying these people wanted me to come in for an appointment."



College students make extremely desirable candidates for donations because young women produce more high-quality eggs with a lower risk of genetic defects. Donors are usually between 21 and 28 years old. Couples also look for donors with traits they wish to have passed on to their children, including higher education or even a special talent, like musical ability.

Egg "donations" are never truly that, with donors' being compensated thousands of dollars on average. Students are often struggling to pay off debts, making the opportunity more alluring. The deal seems right for everyone.

Jewish Ivy League women are in especially high demand in New York, where there is a large Jewish population alongside a small donor pool. Though blond-haired, blue-eyed white women are thought to be top dollar nationally, there's a premium for "eggs of color," which are harder to find because of a small population pool. A Craigslist ad in Manhattan from October offered up to \$25,000 for East and South Asian donors with fluent language skills in their native tongues.

But Alex puts it more bluntly. "If I was short, overweight, or a minority, I'm sure I wouldn't have found immediate success or made that much money to start. I made more money than what's typical because I was deemed an 'ideal type' by the agency. The couple agreed to pay more."

In one extreme case reported on by researcher Barbara Rothman for the Chronicle of Higher Education, a couple offered \$500,000 for an Ivy League donor who was taller than 5 feet 10 inches and scored at least a 1400 on her SATs.

These stories are mostly myths, though. A report in the journal Fertility and Sterility found that "despite scattered and largely unverified reports of amounts of \$50,000 or more appearing repeatedly in the media ... the average level of compensation provided for egg donors was less than \$5,000." Most of the time, five- and six-figure offers posted in advertisements are attention-grabbers to generate leads, but little more, the report said.

More than 15 "egg brokers" and fertility centers, including Columbia's own reproductive services department, were contacted for this story and either did not return repeated calls for comment or declined to be interviewed on the record after questions of egg valuation and ethics were raised.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine is the nation's leading advocacy and watchdog group for egg donation. Its online materials list best practices for donation centers and monetary compensation for donors. The fact that prospective parents want donors who look and behave much like the babies they dream of is not surprising or unwarranted, ASRM says, but rising prices for beautiful women with excellent grades is a "morally troubling" trend that's akin to eugenics.

A recent CNN report indicated that while the nation's economy is weakening, interest in donation has surged. "We are so inundated right now," Robin von Halle, president of Alternative Reproductive Resources in Chicago, told CNN. The agency, which serves as an intermediary between donors and parents, receives up to 50 inquiries a day, more than double the amount from the same time last year. Von Halle said she was convinced that the increase had to do with the financial crisis. "They [donors] don't like to openly admit that, but ... I know that's why they call us, for that financial remuneration."

A survey of 52 anonymous donors by Northwestern University in Chicago and Fertility Centers of Illinois found that all of them felt that compensation was important and that only 11 percent would donate if they were not paid. Thirty percent responded that financial gain was the most important motivation for donation.

The ASRM has its own guidelines for compensation: its ethics committee found that payments over \$5,000 need justification and "sums above \$10,000 go beyond what is appropriate."

In one analytical article, Amherst College professor Mary Lyndon Shanley points out that "the differential pricing based on characteristics like the provider's height, skin, and hair color, athletic or academic achievement, and musical ability seems to validate the assumption that persons with such attributes -- both providers and as-yet unborn children -- are 'worth more' than others."

Experts agree that there's a basic revulsion behind the idea of "playing God" by screening for specific traits outside the realm of genetic disease.

"I'm sure everything in my education here has taught me that that sort of unequal pricing is wrong, but this is about making money and helping a family get pregnant in the process," Alex says. "I have something that some women cannot give. For me, at this moment, that's all that matters."

No Pain, No Gain

Alex says that the initial meeting was "somewhat confusing, tedious." The entire procedure was explained to her before she filled out longer questionnaires about her family's medical and reproductive history. The forms asked her when she had her first alcoholic drink, if she was a virgin, and about the regularity of her periods.

The intensive screening also included a physical exam, blood work, and then a psychological evaluation.

"They wanted to make sure I was completely ready," she recalls. "You can't just walk into a clinic and give your eggs and get paid."

They asked questions about her mental health history, including school stressors, and asked her hypothetical questions.

"Let's say you see a child on the street who has strikingly similar physical qualities to you, and you think one of your eggs could have helped produce that child. How will that make you feel? What would you do?"

Women who smoke, have a body mass index over 30, or a history of gynecologic problems are ineligible for donation. Other illnesses and genetic disorders can disqualify women from the process -- everything from a history of mental illness to paternal-side diabetes.

Ninety percent of women are eliminated from the donation process before a single egg is culled.

But Alex moved forward. After she was approved, she signed a document that confirmed that she'd give up her rights to the donated eggs once they were harvested -- that is, physically removed. After waiting for several weeks, she was

informed that a donor had been found and that she would need to start the actual process of donation.

Egg donation is not as simple as sperm donation. There aren't adult magazines and private rooms that make the process of producing eggs as simple as a five-minute jerk-off session. Instead, it requires weeks of hormone injections and then minor surgery to retrieve the eggs. Alex learned to inject herself with fertility drugs for a little over a month. The drugs stimulated her ovaries to produce several egg follicles, increasing the likelihood of pregnancy. A drug like Lupron that temporarily stops the ovaries from releasing a single egg each month (a normal menstrual cycle) is also administered by daily injection.

Donors must also avoid unprotected sexual contact, as it could result in the birth of twins, triplets, or quadruplets.

Alex said that she visited the fertility center she used almost 15 times for regular blood tests and ultrasound monitoring. She had to schedule appointments around her full course schedule and media internship.

When eggs are ready to be harvested, the donor undergoes a minor surgical procedure called transvaginal ovarian aspiration. While the donor is under anesthesia, a fertility specialist uses a needle to pass through the top wall of the vagina and inserts it into the ovary to remove an egg. This process is repeated for each egg. The procedure can take anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes, and the donor can go home the same day.

Alex skipped a day of classes in order to participate in the surgery, and she spent the weekend resting. Her eggs were tested and found to be acceptable by doctors, so they were fertilized with the intended father's sperm. She says that she doesn't know if her eggs contributed to a successful pregnancy, and she signed a form so that she won't have to know. Different programs can allow for different relationships between donors and intended parents. Alex is keeping hers totally anonymous.

"For me, this egg is DNA, and I'm not sure I am going to put much weight into whatever child may be born," she says. "I guess I prescribe more to the nurture side of things."

Donors get paid regardless of whether a pregnancy occurs. If a donor has a proven success rate, however, she often can receive higher compensation for any subsequent donations since her eggs are deemed dependable. The ASRM recommends that women donate no more than six times, but there's no real system in place to monitor that.

The vast majority of egg donation procedures run smoothly, but there are real risks. Injected hormones increase ovulation, which leads some women to experience headaches, hot flashes, mood changes, fluid retention, and bruises and discomfort at the site of injections.

"I definitely felt like I was experiencing menopause at some points," Alex laughs. "But otherwise, it could've been worse."

The most dangerous of the side effects is a condition called ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, which occurs when ovaries become enlarged. Short-term symptoms are mild and include bloating, weight gain, and abdominal pain. Long-term risks have yet to be fully researched.

Women with severe hyperstimulation also have an increased risk for blood clots. The Center for Egg Options reports that approximately three women out of every thousand are known to have had severe medical complications during the procedure.

If done correctly, the donation procedure won't interfere with a donor's fertility. But, in truth, that's the one thing that Alex says she worries about.

"If I am unable to have my own children in the next 10 years, yeah, I'm going to be really fucking pissed off at myself," she says. "But the likelihood of that is near zero, so why would I stress about it now?"

The Baby Business

Barnard's newly inaugurated president Debora Spar examined the economics of the fertility industry in *The Baby Business*, which was published in 2005. In it, Spar argues that the U.S. would do well to establish a more regulatory framework for egg donation.

Donors are mostly American women because many other industrialized nations have banned paid donations. The number of paid donors is unknown, but Spar estimates that spending on donor eggs was about \$38 million in 2005.

In the United Kingdom, government agencies have capped the amount of payment to egg donors at about \$24 in U.S. currency. This amount is hardly enticing, which is why intended parents across the pond may wait for more than five years before they are matched up with a donor. Spar says that this is most likely because other countries have nationalized health systems with more regulation than the that of the U.S.

At a minimum, Spar says that she'd like to see a public registry in place so that if egg donors want to track their children and if children want to track their genetic parents, they'd be able to do that.

To make her case, Spar cites new research on former sperm donors who fathered many children decades ago and now feel strong, painful connections to children they've never met.

"For decades with adoption and sperm donation, the idea was that it's better for everyone to not know anything, but this was wrong," she says. "It's hard to imagine that the same attachment would not exist for women, if not more so. People should just be aware of the fact that they may feel a connection even if they have never met. Genetic ties do exist."

Spar says that she cares less about the financial end in the scope of larger medical issues.

"The more boring issue we need to address is that we ensure the process is safe and that women understand all the complications and that the rights of children are well-protected," she says. "Once we've done that, I don't really care if a parent spends \$4,000 or \$40,000. I think it's silly to pay that, but it's also vaguely patronizing for women to have a law that puts a limit on the cost of their own genetic material."

Though Spar says that every woman is an individual who can make her own decision, she does offer some advice for any Barnard or Columbia women who are contemplating the procedure.

"Do your homework," she starts. "Think hard. It's a very tempting way to make a lot of money very quickly, but it demands more than a cost-benefit calculation. I don't think young women think long and hard about the emotional risks. Try to imagine not how you feel at 19, but how you're going to feel at 29."

When I relayed the message to Alex, she shrugged.

This story was originally published by Columbia Daily Spectator

To view the original story, [click here](#)

Comments

 [post a comment >>](#)

About UWire

[About UWIRE](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Syndication](#)

Affiliate Program

[Benefits](#) | [Apply](#) | [Current Affiliates](#)

PR Service

[Learn More](#) | [Order](#) | [Recent Press Releases](#)

Visit other CBS Interactive Sites

Popular on CBS sites: [Fantasy Football](#) | [Miley Cyrus](#) | [MLB](#) | [Wii](#) | [GPS](#) | [Recipes](#) | [Mock Draft](#)

[About CBS](#) | [Advertise](#) | [User Feedback](#) | [Site Map](#)

© 2008 CBS Interactive. All rights reserved. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

RE