

Donors and donor children

The many forms of assisted reproductive technology (ART) are commonplace in the medical world and in our society today. The most refined techniques ensure that, in principle, every adult wishing to have a child can be helped. While it is quite acceptable for people to be enthusiastic about the opportunities that science offers, people do not always think about the limits, dilemmas and possible far-reaching consequences for all those involved.

Belgium already has tens of thousands of donor children. There is no exact number, because there is no accurate registration and control. There same lack of control applies to the registration of donors or the supervision on the set maximum number of children per donor.

Belgian legislation on ART practices was only introduced in 2007. Previously, medically assisted conception/reproduction took place according to the own views and criteria of the fertility specialists or the hospital. The principle of strict anonymity was central from the start and this in both directions. This is still the rule today, even though donors can agree to have information about their identity shared. Meanwhile, small children grow up and more and more donor children begin to wonder about their origins. For them, it is increasingly apparent how this anonymity can sometimes also raise deep-seated and fundamental questions: about their own identity, about the lack of genetic history, about whether there are other genetic relatives... These questions are raised more and more, not only by donor children themselves, but also by donors themselves.

That is why we would like to bring you some brief information about the role of the 'Afstammingscentrum', which could be translated as Filiation centre in English. We can offer you some insights, as a donor, in this complex matter.

How the 'Afstammingscentrum' works

As the name suggests, anyone with questions about their own filiation or genetic origins, welcome at our centre.

This centre was established, mandated and financed for this purpose by the Flemish government and it functions as an independent point of reference and orientation par excellence for all kinds of questions from all those involved, not only for the children or descendants.

Our working principle is the basic right of every person to (access to) information about their own background and descent. We represent the interests of children, adolescents and adults who, for whatever reason, do not have a clear view of their descent or origin. The 'Afstammingscentrum' mainly conducts and supports searches in those situations where the legal parentage or filiation does not coincide with genetic filiation, as is the case with ART.

Donor children are an important target group in this respect, but the centre is definitely also open for donors themselves. Even more so, we are in need of cooperative relations with donors, al the while respecting their rights as well.

The 'Afstammingscentrum' has 3 major mandates:

Provide practical and psychosocial support to anyone with questions about their own filiation, origin or genetic history. Mediating between those involved, where necessary, is also part of this assignment. Questions can be very diverse and include the right to access to (adoption) files, collecting DNA-samples in the context of genetic searches in ART, searching for documents to reconstruct family histories (e.g. for the metis people from the Belgian colonization) etc.

More specifically for DNA-research, the centre cooperates with the Centre for Human Genetics (University Hospital Leuven), which was specifically licensed for this purpose by the Flemish government as well.

Informing and raising awareness about parentage matters and the right to access to information about this.

Develop expertise on all possible questions related to filiation and searches for origins.



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Relevant information for donors

For whom?

We see the 'descendants' themselves as primary target groups: donor children, adoptees and metis of colonization. But surely, donors, first parents, adoptive parents and other relatives can also contact our centre. From day one, the 'Afstammingscentrum' received questions from all these target groups, with the first call actually coming from a donor. We found that donors and even relatives of deceased donors are more and more willing to have their DNA-sample taken in case donor children want to look for them.

As a donor, you can also count on us for a professional approach, with attention to complete and correct information, with full respect for your rights (to privacy protection, for example) and the necessary discretion.

Important information for donors

For the time being, Belgian law still contains the principle of donor anonymity.

However, the internet, social media and international databases have expanded and strengthened the search options for donor children to such an extent that, in reality, anonymity can no longer be a 100% guaranteed. Donors, even under this principle of anonymity, are being found using these databases and social media. It is important to know here, that being found as a donor, in itself does not have any legal consequences (such as grounds for inheritance rights or child support claims...).

In addition, the discourse on children's and human rights has also influenced the view on anonymity and has since been abolished in several European countries. This did not affect the number of donations in a negative way. More importantly, this has changed the attitude of donors and the understanding of the 'right to know' of donor children is constantly increasing, also in Belgium. We can also see this in the growing openness among donors.

While the 'Afstammingscentrum', as said, starts from everyone's right to know from whom he/she/they descend, this does NOT mean that we do not want to offer support and information to you as a donor as well. Your rights will surely be respected as well, such as your right to privacy, or your right to correct and complete information. Be well aware that, as a donor, you can contact us with all your questions: what happens if one of 'my' donor children tracks me down? How can I play a part in the requests myself? Why should I donate a DNA-sample? What are the legal consequences of a successful search for a donor child? What about my family? How does that DNA-test work and what guarantees does it contain? ... With all these questions, and more, you are more than welcome at the 'Afstammingscentrum'.

The above-mentioned Centre for Human Genetics is our exclusive partner in this regard, since cooperation with international, commercial databases is not possible for us. We do notice however that people often use these databases, usually before they contact us. Here as well, we offer our support, both to the donor child and to the donor in question.

We warmly invite you to reflect and consider the options of giving a DNA-sample to increase the chances of success in future searches of donor children. Please, do not hesitate to contact us about this for more information and details.

For all questions as a donor,
Feel free to contact the 'Afstammingscentrum'



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