The incredible, sellable egg

What was once a personal journey has become a booming business for donors and recruiters

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With its row of nubile women, the eye-catching ad on CTA buses and trains could easily be mistaken for promoting an upscale dating Web site.

While the Chicago-based agency--ConceiveAbilities--is certainly in the matchmaking business, it doesn't charge a fee. In fact, this company will pay you-$7,000 to be exact--providing you're no older than 30, in excellent health and can spare a couple dozen artificially ripened eggs.

Heather Scoma, 30, a graduate student in Milwaukee who donated eggs last year to help a couple conceive, found the process time consuming, but she also found meaning in helping others--and the money helped pay off a debt.

In the mid-1990s, the egg donation industry was in its infancy--and if mentioned at all, it would be in whispers. Now, the number of annual attempts at fertilization from donated eggs has tripled in a decade and some agencies find they have more donors than recipients. Ethical questions are also being raised as the business increasingly is commercialized and recruiters and donors cash in.

Demand for eggs continues to rise, driven strongly by older women, as infertile families turn more quickly to egg donations in the quest for conception, and fees to donors edge upward. It has even spawned a cottage industry for lawyers and psychologists.

Technology goes mainstream

Today, across the U.S., egg donor technology has gone as mainstream as selling cereal. Recruitment advertisements are not only a fixture on city buses, but in campus newspapers, on the radio and on dozens of Web sites. Scoma merely had to type "egg donor" into Google to be connected with a dizzying array of clinics mixing capitalism and conception in unprecedented--and some would say uncomfortable--ways.

"What we're seeing is the confluence of money, young women's reproduction and the Internet. Tie all these things together and people get excited," said Sean Tipton, spokesman for the American Society of Reproductive
Medicine, an organization for fertility specialists.

In the U.S., alone, making babies is a robust $3 billion a year industry, according to Debora Spar, a Harvard Business School professor. And with more women delaying childbirth, the demand for in-vitro fertilization will only increase, she explained.

Eggs have been a particularly hot commodity. In 1996, donated eggs were used in more than 5,000 attempts. In 2004, the number exceeded 15,000, according to a December report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"For older, infertile women, it's becoming clear that this is a very good option," said Spar, author of "The Baby Business: How Money, Science and Politics Drive the Commerce of Conception."

"If things aren't working, the trend is to go to donated eggs sooner rather than later," she said.

But such a wide open market is freighted with ethical questions: Is it permissible for a donor to use her check to pay off school loans but not OK to use it for a cruise? Will financially strapped women end up ovulating for more affluent ones? Will youthful eggs from smarter candidates go to the highest bidder? (One ad in the Stanford University newspaper promised $100,000 for a donor with "proven collegiate athletic ability.")

The majority of donors receive compensation in the $5,000 to $10,000 range for 15 to 20 eggs, adhering to ASRM guidelines.

Still, anyone who thinks the paycheck is out of line has never been shot up with hormones, then had their eggs suctioned out of their ovaries, according to donor advocates.

"What you are paying for is a time-intensive, unpleasant and intrusive process," Tipton said. "We think it is totally appropriate to compensate women who are kind enough to do this."

Rigorous process for donors

Inside ConceiveAbilities' comfortable Lincoln Park office, the photos of some of these women adorn the walls. Prospective parents can view all potential donors, searching by ethnicity, eye color and other physical characteristics but, contrary to popular belief, not by SAT scores or advanced degrees.

They are overwhelmingly attractive, with obedient hair and teeth as uniform as Chiclets. Once recipients zero in on possible candidates, they can learn more about their backgrounds. To the question, "What are you most proud of?" one prospect wrote: "The way I've maintained my appearance and health after having three kids."

Egg donor applicants must submit to a rigorous process, filling out reams of paperwork followed by a three-hour personal interview and medical and psychological testing. A candidate may be weeded out for reasons such as drug use or smoking (tobacco affects egg quality).

Most agencies offer donors the choice of being notified if their eggs resulted in a pregnancy. (Egg donor IVF has about a 40 percent success rate.)

Nazca Fontes, 36, started ConceiveAbilities a decade ago, armed with a newly minted biology degree and her own experiences as a donor. "I was at the right place, at the right time, supported by the right people," said Fontes, whose firm has a presence in eight metropolitan areas nationwide.

In the early years, wooing suitable prospects was a challenge, she said. Myths about the procedure--how it would affect weight, hair growth and future fertility--were rampant.
In 2007, however, the task is considerably easier. "In fact, the tables have turned and we have more women interested in donating eggs than recipients," said Fontes, the mother of two young sons.

While most everyone seeking an egg donor wants college students, advertising strategy differs, depending on geography. California agencies target actresses in the entertainment trade papers, while billboards are more popular in New York. The CTA campaign--launched last fall--has been "very effective," said Fontes.

Many who respond are surprised by the time commitment. From beginning to end, she estimates the process at about 100 hours. "That's $70 an hour for giving your genetic material to a stranger. Movers probably make more."

Fontes takes great pride in her well-edited database of 80 to 100 profiles, one-third the size of many competitors'. She accepts only about 10 percent of all applicants, one reason why she constantly needs to recruit.

"I think of myself in the same way as a job recruiter, so even showing up for the interview in cutoffs and flip-flops tells me something," she observes. "We really do our due diligence."

Certain ethnicities are tougher to solicit. At ConceiveAbilities, the database is overwhelmingly Caucasian. At Eggdonor.com, based in Encino, Calif., of the crop of 25 new donors, 16 were white and the remainder were divided among African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics. One woman identified herself as Cherokee Indian/Swedish/Jewish.

Still, some couples can spend hours endlessly scrolling through candidates, never quite finding what they're looking for.

**Academic excellence sought**

Given some clients' desire for the perfect pedigree, Fontes said she doubts whether her own diploma from the University of Redlands in California would pass muster.

A perusal of current ads in the papers of a dozen prestigious universities yielded no six-figure offers. But there was no shortage of genetic wish lists, such as the classified ad in Thursday's Stanford Daily, placed by a couple willing to spend $10,000 (plus expenses) for the right Caucasian egg donor "with excellent academic record, high IQ, creativity and a fair complexion."

Some firms have two-tier pricing for candidates with the right credentials. Fertility Alternatives, based in California, spells out the requirements for its "exceptional donor" category in detail, including: "A graduate of a major university (preferably Ivy League), SAT scores higher than 1350 ... and willing to provide college transcripts."

No such documentation is required of male donors--who don't even need to provide a photo, said Spar. "There's no such thing as premium sperm," she notes dryly.

It's just one of the many inconsistencies in the fertility market, she explained.

"I understand someone wanting a certain ethnicity, but when someone says they want a blond, blue-eyed woman who attended Harvard... what does that say about the couple? It's an unnecessary burden to place on a not-yet-conceived child."

Financial guidelines are necessary--and followed by reputable practitioners--because stratospheric fees could lead to coercion, said Dr. Edmond Confino, an expert in reproductive endocrinology at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Some people want donors who "look like a Playboy bunny," he added.
"They cross boundaries over what is reasonable ... and it has nothing to do with the quality of eggs. You can have two smart parents and the kid is an idiot."

While compensation for donors is spelled out, it is more difficult to pinpoint what agencies receive from infertile couples. One expert puts the fee in the $12,000 to $13,000 range.

It is unreasonable to expect women to do this solely out of altruism--unless it's for a relative, Spar said. "Without compensation, you don't get eggs."

'Something very meaningful'

It was a heartbreaking story that brought Scoma to egg donation. A co-worker was having trouble conceiving, raising Scoma's awareness of infertility, which affects some 15 percent of the population. "I had no idea," said the mother of two children, ages 9 and 5. "It had been so easy for me."

After being accepted, she had to drive to Chicago from Milwaukee for doctor appointments. The cash, of course, was an incentive. (She used the $7,000 to pay off a car loan.) But shortly after she started hormone injections, she received a thank-you note from the parents-to-be.

"That's when things changed from just the money to the fact that you're actually doing something very meaningful for someone else," Scoma said.

"It was a very positive experience," she said. "I would absolutely do it again."

Her decision was supported by almost everyone, except her sister. "She questioned how I could do this and not wonder about how the child was raised. But I didn't think of it as a child," noted Scoma. "I ovulate every month and I don't think of that as a child."

The kind of questions raised by Scoma's sister rarely apply to sperm donors, said Tipton. He attributes that to latent sexism.

"Yes, being an egg donor is more complicated ... but in this society, we care a lot more about what women are doing with their reproductive capacity than men."

Susan Klock, a clinical psychologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, has studied donors' attitudes postdonation and found that they were generally satisfied. In 2003, a survey of 52 donors revealed 35 percent were willing to donate again.

Harvard's Spar thinks that the debate has become side-tracked by the money. "It's a red herring that distracts from more important issues: Are these technologies safe for both mothers and children? What happens to women who shoot themselves up with massive amounts of hormones? What happens to the children? Are we protecting their rights?"

The debate is where sperm donation was a quarter-century ago--and is just beginning to be discussed. Without the same discourse and transparency, questions will continue to hang in the air, Klock said.

"This is the first time that women are really gestating and delivering without being genetically related to the child ... and that's what makes people pause. People are right to be cautious and be concerned. As a society, it's time to start talking."

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The egg donation screening, retrieval process

How egg donation works:

- The first step is going through the screening process. The screening includes blood tests for sexually transmitted diseases, hormone levels and genetic diseases. Cervical cultures will be taken by an OB/GYN. A transvaginal ultrasound will be conducted to ensure that the would-be donor's ovaries, cervix and uterus are healthy. Psychological and drug tests also are included.

- Once a would-be donor has passed all the tests and signed the legal contract, the donation process begins. It starts with a self-administered, injectable medication of follicle stimulation hormone, which boosts egg production. This medication is usually taken for seven to 12 days.

- When a physician determines it is time for retrieval, the donor will be given instructions on getting an injection of the hormone HCG. This injection prepares the donor's ovaries to release the follicles.

- The retrieval is scheduled for about 36 hours after the HCG injection is given.

- During the retrieval, the donor will usually be under light anesthesia administered through an IV. The eggs are retrieved from the donor's ovaries via a small needle inserted through the vaginal wall into the ovaries, and the eggs are then vacuumed from each follicle. The entire procedure takes about 15-20 minutes.

- The donor will receive her compensation as soon as the agency is advised that the donor has completed the retrieval. Usually donors can resume regular activity the next day.

--Source: Findadonor.com

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What motivates donors

To help understand what motivates egg donors, researchers in Illinois surveyed women who donated eggs at a clinic from January 2003 to January 2006.

Ten of 40 responded to the survey. The average age of the donors was 24.5, and they had each received $5,000 per donation.

Seventy percent had donated eggs once, while 20 percent had donated twice and 10 percent had donated four times.

Some used a portion of their reimbursement money for savings (30 percent), others for a down payment on property (20 percent), or school expenses (20 percent), or paying down a car loan (20 percent). Half of the donors used a portion of their reimbursement to pay back loans including credit cards. None of the donors spent their reimbursement on luxury items or vacations.

--Source: American Society for Reproductive Medicine