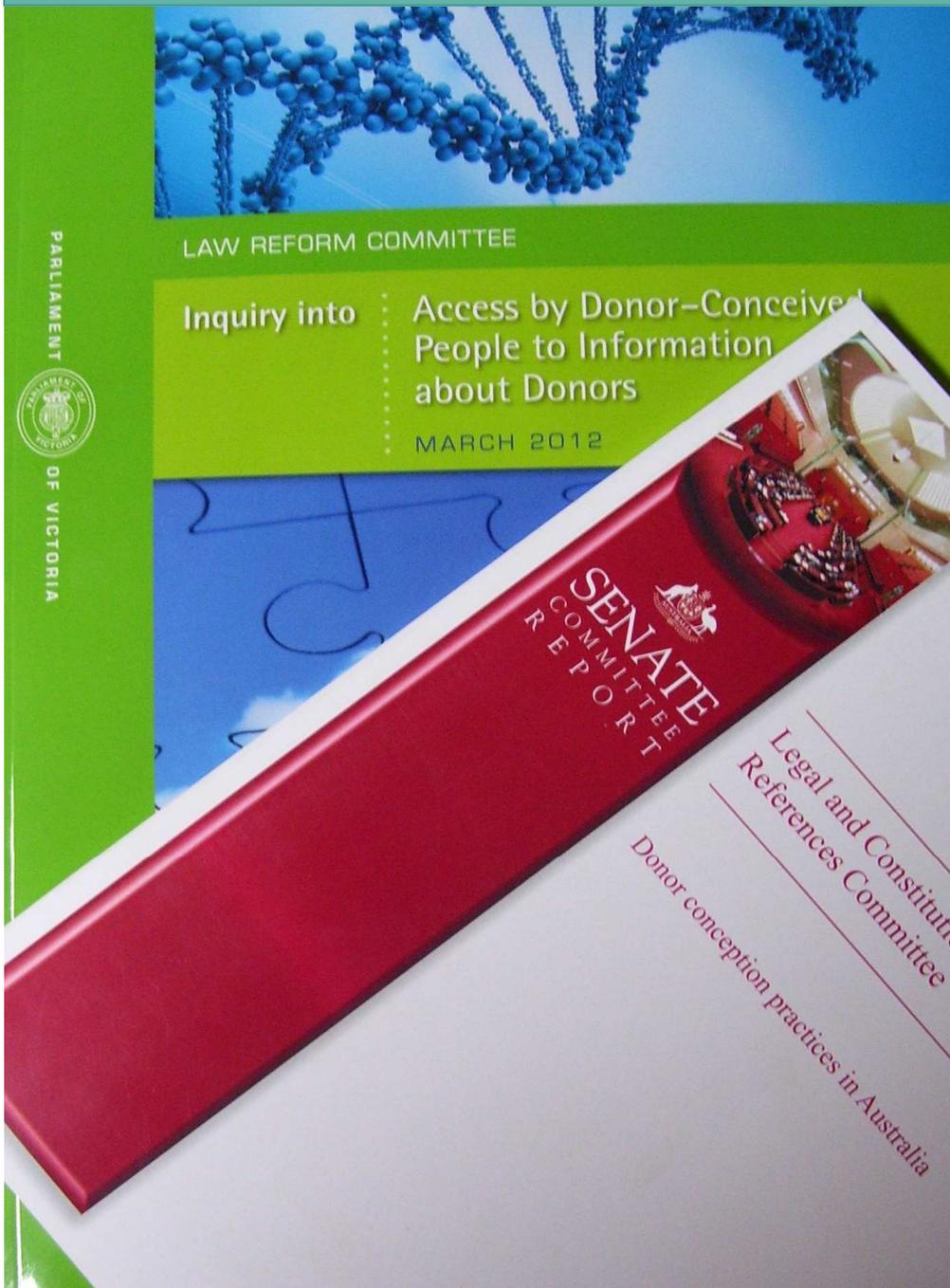


# Vanish Voice

Winter 2012



## **IN THIS ISSUE**

### **GENERAL**

- From the Manager
- AGM information
- Book Review
- PhD research study
- Website links
- Support Group Dates

### **ADOPTION**

- AASW Acknowledgement

### **POST DONOR CONCEPTION**

- We can't keep them in the dark*
- Law Reform Update
- Recommendations
- A donor's view

VANISH  
PO Box 112  
Carlton South 3053

P 03) 9328 8611  
F (03) 9329 1752  
E [info@vanish.org.au](mailto:info@vanish.org.au)  
W [www.vanish.org.au](http://www.vanish.org.au)

1st Floor, 50 Howard Street  
North Melbourne Victoria 30051  
ABN 35 582 901 627

## FROM THE MANAGER

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### Dear Members and Friends of VANISH

#### APOLOGIES

It is shaping up to be a big year. You will have read in my last bulletin to you that the Victorian State Government is preparing to apologise to the adoption community. We believe that Minister Mary Wooldridge will undertake some consultation in August with a view to the Apology being in late October. As soon as we have formal confirmation of this news we will let you know. As well the Federal Attorney General has established a Reference Group to consult the adoption community about a proposed Federal Apology early in 2013, VANISH Chairperson **Leigh Hubbard** will be on this group and will keep you informed of progress. Meanwhile the South Australian Apology is on the VANISH website and is good reading and will very soon be followed by Apologies from the ACT and from Tasmania.

There are of course 19 other recommendations in the Senate Inquiry into *'former forced adoption policies and practices'* and we welcome your feedback to VANISH on all these matters. We are particularly keen to hear from you about your opinions on legislation amendment – please email me at [manager@vanish.org.au](mailto:manager@vanish.org.au). The full report is on our VANISH website.

#### NEW RESEARCH

The Australian Institute of Family Studies AIFS has completed a National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Experiences commissioned in late 2009 by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs FAHCSIA.

The aim of this new research study is to utilise and build on the existing research and evidence about the extent and impact of past adoption experiences. It is intended to use the findings to strengthen the evidence and impact of past adoption experiences and to use the findings to strengthen the evidence available to governments to address the current needs of individuals affected by past adoption experiences, including the need for information, counselling and reunion services. The report will go to the COAG

Standing Council on Community, Housing and Disability Services CDSMAC for consideration this month. We are delighted to announce that Dr Daryl Higgins, the Deputy Director at AIFS will be our guest speaker on this topic at our VANISH AGM.

#### AGM

**THE VANISH AGM WILL BE HELD ON FRIDAY, 7 SEPTEMBER AT THE CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN CHILD AND FAMILY WELFARE AT LEVEL 5, 50 MARKET STREET IN THE CITY. PLEASE KEEP THIS DATE FREE FROM 5.30 FOR 6.00 TO 8.00 P.M. WITH DRINKS AND A LIGHT SUPPER AND MAKE SURE YOU CAN JOIN US TO HEAR DARYL TALKING ABOUT THE NEEDED SERVICE RESPONSE TO ADOPTION.**

After the extreme disappointment of having the Victorian State Government discontinue the VANISH counselling brokerage program we wait with interest the findings of this AIFS report. We are interested to have your comments on the lack of counselling available in Victoria so we can continue to share these with Minister Wooldridge and her Department of Human Services: please respond to [manager@vanish.org.au](mailto:manager@vanish.org.au).

#### VANISH IS MOVING

The VANISH Committee of Management has decided in this our 23<sup>rd</sup> year to economise by moving to smaller premises in order to ensure we can maintain service provision to our community as costs continue to rise. We will therefore move in September to 1st floor, 50 - 52 Howard Street, North Melbourne – about ten minutes away from where we are now and just off the No. 57 tram route. The building is light and bright with a lovely coffee shop opposite for meetings and chats. We will have small meeting rooms available and if our meetings and support groups get bigger we are surrounded by pleasant rooms we can hire. Most support groups will continue to fit within the new VANISH office and be able to meet at the new premises. When we have moved in we will have some 'open days' for you to visit us. For the meantime, through August, we will continue to be at Franklin Street. Thank you in advance to those lovely volunteers who are giving us a hand with the huge amount of extra work a move entails. If you are available to do some unpacking please give Diane a call or an email – she will be pleased to hear from you. [diane@vanish.org.au](mailto:diane@vanish.org.au).

## 'THANK YOU'

VANISH ONLY WORKS BECAUSE IT IS A  
COMMUNITY

## OUR SPECIAL VOTE OF THANKS TO

**Support Groups:** each month I am touched and astounded with the generosity which enables our VANISH Support Groups to keep operating.

These groups are not funded and continue to run only by the sterling efforts of **Diane, Liz, Michele, Pauline, Charlotte, Lauren, Kate and backup from Sue and VANISH staff members.**

It is not an easy thing to maintain a timely, gracious presence in these cold winter nights and a huge 'thank you' goes out to these amazing stalwarts. I know, from feedback, how important these groups are to so many people - so to our facilitators we wish to recognise the great service you give so very humbly. Michele has recently taken some time off to welcome Abigail to her family so big congratulations to her family.

- ◆ **Gordon Ley** for his untiring pro bono assistance to the Manager and VANISH with gracious, detailed, daily legal advice during this challenging move period – even during a very special celebration – happy big birthday Gordon!
- ◆ Thanks also go to Peter **Slifirski** for pro bono assistance with the architectural work related to fit-out for the move.
- ◆ VANISH is also extremely grateful to **Kaman and to Alice and Bianca** at Freehills legal firm for ongoing legal assistance and good coffee!
- ◆ The regular publication of VOICE always enables us to provide you with some new thoughts and contacts and our thanks go to **Diane, Sue, Barbara and Pauline.** We hope reading VOICE also prompts you to keep an eye on our website for up-to-date news courtesy of the expert **Simon Keogh** a member of VANISH Committee of Management who tirelessly monitors this task.
- ◆ This month we are also delighted that **Lauren Burns and Ian Smith**, both members of the VANISH Committee of Management have shared with you their experience post donor conception and donor donation. VANISH is pleased to support the post donor conception community and has recently begun a new Support Group for this community.
- ◆ VANISH has very, very frugal resources and

without pro bono assistance we would be broke! These resources are diligently monitored by **Barbara Burns** our pro bono accountant and we acknowledge and thank her for this regular detailed assistance.

- ◆ VANISH held two wonderful seminars for counsellors and professionals earlier this year where discussion was robust and learning profound due to the courageous willingness of mothers, adopted daughters, an adoptive father and counsellors who honestly shared their experiences with others – thank you **Michele, Kim, Madeleine, Hugh and Lyn.**
- ◆ Thanks to all the **VANISH Committee of Management** for their ongoing support for VANISH and my role as Manager. I particularly wish to acknowledge the fine work of **Helen Boucher and Meagan O'Connor** who have recently resigned from the Committee – your diligent, caring commitment is much appreciated.

VANISH plans to continue to hold a seminar series in 2013 and would appreciate hearing from you about topics of interest to you. You know the email - [manager@vanish.org.au](mailto:manager@vanish.org.au).

This month I have been able to attend a seminar by VARTA on cross country access to reproductive technology and a seminar on how the Patient Review Panel on Surrogacy and related matters operates. It is always important to maintain a focus on the *'best interests of the child'* against the strong belief in our society that everyone has the right to be a parent – the right to the *'gift of life'* - whatever the technology, complexity or costs involved. It would be excellent if VANISH could get some in depth research done on the importance of the formation and maintenance of identity and the impact on identity of different forms of conception as well as separation from biological and now gestational mothers.

Thank you for your responses to my latest VANISH news bulletin and I look forward to hearing from you again. Meanwhile keep warm and rested during the heart of winter and we anticipate seeing you at the VANISH AGM on the 7<sup>th</sup> September and hope you will pop in and visit us in our new premises when the first blossoms of Spring appear.

Best wishes

**Coleen Clare**, Manager, VANISH August 2012

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

(Australian Association of Social Workers)

### Acknowledging birth mothers who experienced being forced to relinquish their child

The AASW acknowledges that many birth parents were young, in personal crisis, and vulnerable, and that many young, single or stigmatised mothers were made to feel inadequate, disempowered, isolated and shamed by health and welfare staff including social workers. The AASW acknowledges that many women were not given the necessary assistance, and in some cases were deliberately denied access to counselling services prior to giving consent and were not informed of their legal rights.

Notwithstanding that some workers may not have been trained and accredited social workers, the AASW acknowledges that the historical actions of some social workers as government agents and instruments of governmental health and welfare policies have contributed to the significant and increasing pain and loss experienced by birth parents, adoptees and their families. Instead of challenging and seeking to change oppressive, judgemental, and inequitable policies and/or practices, some social workers in the health and welfare sectors may have been co-opted to uphold and enact unjust practices. These actions were in contravention of core values of social work such as human dignity and worth, social justice and self-determination. These actions may have been outside and in contravention of Commonwealth and State policies.

The AASW acknowledges and regrets that these policies and practices reflected the values and attitudes of the times and, for unmarried pregnant women, adoption was assumed to be one of very few possible options because of lack of financial and other support and the stigma associated with illegitimacy and motherhood out of wedlock.

The AASW acknowledges that, decades later, many of these parents, adopted people and their families continue to grapple with the long-lasting effects of forced or coerced adoptions. The AASW also acknowledges that as time

passes the grief and pain of such separation has not diminished as may have been advised at the time, rather this grief has worsened with the passage of time not unlike any other incident of post-traumatic stress. Through our present-day work with women affected by past adoption practices, we understand and acknowledge the deep grief that many mothers, fathers, adopted people and their extended families have experienced after the loss of a child to adoption.

Finally, AASW notes that social work may have been part of the past problems and pain caused by past, forced adoptions. However, some social workers also sought to be active players in advocating for client-centred solutions, even under severe pressure from family members and other professionals that they conform to the dominant ideology and preferred societal solutions of the day. This work has continued to this day. There is research evidence that since the 1960's, the AASW has strengthened its self-regulation processes, and social workers have contributed to advancing ethical, professional social work processes in adoption work. The AASW continues to lobby the Commonwealth Government in order that social work becomes a registered and regulated profession in Australia.

## APOLOGIES:

The South Australian Government is the latest body to offer an apology to those affected by forced adoption practises and policies.

You can visit their website on [www.sa.gov.au/](http://www.sa.gov.au/)  
A video of the event is also available and can also be ordered through this site.

### **APOLOGIES TO THOSE AFFECTED BY FORMER FORCED ADOPTION POLICIES AND PRACTICES SO FAR ARE:**

9 June 2009 - Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital  
 19 October 2011 – West Australian Government  
 24 November 2011 – Catholic Health Australia (Newcastle, NSW)  
 29 November 2011 – Uniting Church, South Australia  
 28 December 2011 – Uniting Church, Victoria & Tasmania  
 23 January 2012 – Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne  
 18 July 2012 – South Australian Government  
 14 August 2012 - ACT Government

2012 - Victorian Government to apologise soon  
 2013 - Federal Government to apologise  
 Tasmanian Government - date to be decided

## Book Review:

***Facing the Fears* by Collette Glazebrook**

Published by Boolarong Press

[www.colletteglazebrook.com](http://www.colletteglazebrook.com)

Collette has written this book about her journey through life to date. Being an adoptee she writes with considered thoughtfulness for all those affected by adoption. Collette's story is like all adoptees who when the realisation occurs that they need to connect with birth family how do they go about it? Collette explains her journey with decency and kindness throughout. How the journey not only affects ourselves, but others in our lives: spouses, adopted family, our children, our grandchildren.

Collette explains the difficulties of searching and government hindrance; she also gives us hope and gives us much to contemplate. She constantly reminds the reader that it is her story and that all adoptees have differing journeys with different outcomes and that all adoptees need their own personal journey validated.

Collette on first finding her birth family discovered she had nine siblings; all were adopted. Her mother's story is one of deep sadness.

I highly recommend Collette's book; it is written with compassion and also there is a "daring to dance" element as well.

A highly recommended book written by an Aussie adoptee.

Not all will like Collette's book, but to many it will give quiet encouragement.

*Neil aka Bobby*

Were you Adopted in Victoria ?  
Are you the Mother of a child still living at home?  
Join a Monash University,

School of Social Work,  
PhD research study.



We would love to hear about your  
motherhood experiences.  
Call Jeanette Conrick on 0409 256 355

## VANISH COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT

THE VANISH COMMITTEE OF  
MANAGEMENT HAS VACANCIES  
IN ALL CATEGORIES FOR THE NEXT TERM  
(offspring/biological parent/non- biological  
parent)

THE STRENGTH OF THE PARTICIPATION  
OF THE ADOPTION AND POST DONOR  
CONCEPTION COMMUNITIES IS THE  
STRENGTH OF VANISH.

PLEASE THINK OF JOINING US – YOUR  
COMMITMENT OF ONE EVENING A  
MONTH PLUS SOME ONGOING ACTIVITY  
WILL ENRICH US.

PLEASE CONTACT COLEEN OR LEIGH  
AT VANISH IF YOU WISH  
TO DISCUSS JOINING US.

**Nominations forms are available through  
the office and need to be received no later  
than 23 August 2012**

## INDEPENDENT EXPERTISE

We are also looking for the expertise of two  
INDEPENDENT persons who do not need to  
be members of VANISH but who could bring  
relevant experience, knowledge and skill to  
our committee.

Please contact either Coleen or Leigh if you are  
interested in joining the VANISH committee



## We can't keep them in the dark

Clem Newton-Brown *March 29, 2012 (OPINION The Age)*

### Donor-conceived children must have the right to know who they are and where they came from.

If you are a child conceived with donor sperm in Victoria, your right to access information about your biological father depends on the date of your conception.

If you were born any time since 1998 you have no problems, as your donor was required to consent to identifying information being released to you. If you were born between 1988 and 1997, you have rights to receive information about your donor father only if he consents. But if you were born before 1988, you have no rights at all. Your only avenue is to put yourself on a voluntary register and hope that your biological father does the same.

Most donors pre-1988 were young university students acting altruistically, or attracted by the small fee paid to cover "expenses". The deal was that they would remain forever anonymous.

The problem is that the innocent non-parties to this deal, and the ones most affected, are the children. They are now adults and many desperately yearn for that most basic of human rights: to know who they are and where they came from.

The key questions that emerged in the Victorian Parliament's law reform committee inquiry into access to information about donors were essentially ethical: should all donor-conceived people have equal rights to access information about their donors? Should a donor-conceived person have this right even if the donor was assured of anonymity? What role, if any, should the state have in facilitating access to information about donors?

Many donor-conceived people who are unable to obtain information about their donors experience distress and anguish. Their ability to access information is constrained as a result of decisions made by adults - their parents, the donor, and medical professionals - before they were conceived. On the other hand, donors were promised anonymity. While all of the donors from whom the committee received evidence empathised with their donor offspring, some opposed the release of identifying information. They were concerned about how their existing families would be affected should their identity be released to their donor-offspring. Others wanted contact with their donor-offspring.

When the committee began its work, it was inclined to believe that the wishes of some donors to remain

anonymous should take precedence and that identifying information should only be released with a donor's consent.

But by the end of the inquiry, the unanimous view was that the rights of the children should take precedence.

After receiving evidence from donor-conceived people, donors, parents, medical and counselling professionals, department representatives and academics, we decided that the state had a responsibility to provide all donor-conceived people with equal opportunity to access information about their donors.

It is a ground-breaking recommendation, without global precedent. However, the committee recognises the importance of ensuring that there will be no unreasonable interference in donors' lives.

Consequently, one of the committee's recommendations is that donors, and donor-conceived people, have the ability to place a veto on contact from each other.

Giving all donor-conceived people the opportunity to access identifying information about their donors, regardless of their date of conception, is consistent with the first guiding principle found in the Victorian legislation regulating donor conception: that the welfare and interests of people born as a result of assisted reproductive treatment procedures are paramount. It is also consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Victoria's Charter of Human Rights. And it is not such a radical idea to give precedence to children's rights in these circumstances. Victorian legislation in the 1980s retrospectively allowed adopted people to access information about their birth parents, despite promises of anonymity.

Ultimately, what swayed the committee was the humanity in the passionate, cohesive arguments of the children. They were never thought of in terms of their needs and the desire they may eventually feel to know their lineage. This was one big social and medical experiment in which the donors, doctors and parents could not foresee the impact on these children. Several decades on, we know the results of this experiment. These children are young adults whom our society never properly considered.

We made a mistake 30-odd years ago, and now it is time to correct it.

**Clem Newton-Brown is chairman of the Victorian Parliament's law reform committee. This is an edited text of his speech to Parliament yesterday.**<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/politics/we-cant-keep-them-in-the-dark-20120328-1vym4.html>

## Donor Conception Law Reform Update by Lauren Burns

On 28 March 2012 the final report of the Victorian Law Reform Committee's inquiry into access by donor-conceived people to information about donors was released. The first and most important recommendation was, "*That the Victorian Government introduce legislation to allow all donor-conceived people to obtain identifying information about their donors.*" – A world first.

If legislated, this would remove the unfairness currently affecting donor conceived people born before 1988 who presently have no legal avenues to apply for information about the identity of their biological parent. The Law Reform Committee chaired by Clem Newton-Brown (member for Prahran) and deputy chaired by Jane Garrett (member for Brunswick) took on board the lessons learned from adoption. The findings and recommendations of the committee share many parallels to the adoption experience of law reform, in which Victoria was the first state to allow adoptees access to their original birth certificates. The committee faced the ethical consideration of donors who were recruited under anonymity, drawing parallels with the promise of anonymity given to relinquishing parents, which was overturned by the Adoption act in 1984.

Ultimately the committee were convinced by the power of the personal stories shared by donor conceived people about the impact on their day-to-day life of the law that denies them basic information about their medical, social and cultural backgrounds. This is embodied by the story of Narelle Grech who has unsuccessfully searched for her biological father for over 15 years. Recently she was diagnosed with stage four bowel cancer and her search has become more urgent as she hopes to be able to warn her biological father and half-siblings about the necessity to be regularly screened for this disease.

The overwhelming majority of public submissions for the report supported the removal of secrecy provisions. In the course of extensive

public hearings the committee heard from donor-conceived people, donors, parents of donor-conceived people, counsellors and doctors. Contrary to popular opinion, testimony showed that many donors care about the wellbeing of the people they helped create and are willing to provide information. Donors currently outnumber donor-conceived people on the pre-1988 voluntary register, which is administered by Births Deaths and Marriages.

The committee recognised that a right to information does not equate to a right to contact or a right to form a relationship. Therefore, the 30 recommendations cover provisions for the availability of counselling and intermediary services and the right to lodge contact preference forms and contact vetoes as a way of balancing the rights and interests of all parties.

This process was a great example of democracy in action and Victoria can stand proudly on its record of protecting the rights of people who have experienced separation from family of origin through adoption or assisted reproductive technologies. I would like to thank the Law Reform committee for not only listening to us donor conceived people but being brave enough to take action and recommend these changes. I encourage people to write to the Health Minister David Davis to urge the Victorian government to legislate the recommendations of the Law Reform Committee as soon as possible, in recognition of the lengthy time that pre-1988 donor-conceived Victorians have waited their turn for equality and justice.

VANISH is extremely grateful for the following contributions:

In particular we thank the VANISH staff for donating their time and expertise in getting our last newsletter and bulletin prepared and distributed

Everyone for their contributions to VOICE

Bernadette, Jo, Judith, Nina, Mary, Gaylene, Tara, and David for their contributions to the Ryerson Index

Our helpers at Support Groups

Barbara, Joanne, Lyn M, Roger L, and Roger S for voluntary assistance

Thank you for cash donations from Tricia, Mary, Michael, Frank and Heather

## Table of Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** That the Victorian Government introduce legislation to allow all donor-conceived people to obtain identifying information about their donors

**Recommendation 2:** That, in implementing Recommendation 1, the Victorian Government require that a child applying for identifying information about his or her donor only be provided with that information if: 1) the child's parents have consented to the application; or 2) a counsellor has provided counselling to the child and has confirmed in writing that the person is sufficiently mature to understand the consequences of the disclosure

**Recommendation 3:** That, with the introduction of the legislation described in Recommendation 1, the Victorian Government require donor-conceived people to attend counselling prior to obtaining identifying information about donors

**Recommendation 4:** That, with the introduction of the legislation described in Recommendation 1, the Victorian Government introduce provisions for contact vetoes that may be lodged by a donor or a donor-conceived person following counselling, with the following features: that contact vetoes only be available to people conceived from gametes donated prior to 1998, and the donors of those gametes; that donors may only lodge a contact veto after they have been informed that a donor-conceived person has lodged an application for identifying information about them; that a veto prohibits contact between the donor and the donor-conceived person; that suitable penalties be established for breach of a veto; that a veto lapses within five years if not renewed by the person who lodged it; and that the person who lodged a veto may withdraw it at any time

**Recommendation 5:** That, with the introduction of the legislation described in Recommendation 1, the Victorian Government introduce provisions for donors to lodge a contact preference form for presentation to a donor-conceived person

**Recommendation 6:** That the Victorian Government introduce the measures proposed in Recommendation 1 through Recommendation 5 following a period of time sufficient to publicise and inform the Victorian community of retrospective changes to donor-conception arrangements

**Recommendation 7:** That the Victorian Government encourage organisations, agencies and persons holding information on donor-conception to release, upon request, non-identifying information about a donor to a donor-conceived person, his or her parents, and his or her descendants

**Recommendation 8:** That the Victorian Government encourage organisations, agencies and persons holding information on donor-conception to release to a donor, upon request, non-identifying information about his or her donor-conceived offspring.

**Recommendation 9:** That the Victorian Government introduce a mechanism for medical information from a donor to be provided to a donor-conceived person, where there is evidence of hereditary or genetic disease or risks to the health of the donor-conceived person

**Recommendation 10:** That the agency managing the donor registers be empowered to release to a donor-conceived person, upon request, non-identifying information about his or her donor-conceived siblings

**Recommendation 11:** That the agency managing the donor registers be empowered to release to the parents of a donor-conceived person, upon request, non-identifying information about that person's donor-conceived siblings

**Recommendation 12:** That the voluntary register remain the only means for donor-conceived people to seek identifying information about their donor-conceived siblings

**Recommendation 13:** That the Victorian Government introduce a mechanism for medical information from a donor-conceived person to be provided to that person's donor-conceived siblings where there is evidence of hereditary or genetic disease or risks to the health of the donor-conceived person

**Recommendation 14:** That the Victorian Government introduce legislation to empower one agency to provide all services relating to the provision of information, linking and counselling services related to donor-conception, including management of the donor registers, a letterbox service, education and public campaigns

**Recommendation 15:** That the agency referred to in Recommendation 14 be granted access to the Victorian register of electors in order to conduct its functions

**Recommendation 16:** That VARTA assume the responsibilities of the agency referred to in Recommendation 14

**Recommendation 17:** That the Victorian Government introduce legislation to transfer ownership of, and responsibility for, the donor register databases

# donor conception

currently held by the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, to the agency referred to in Recommendation 14

**Recommendation 18:** That the agency referred to in Recommendation 14 offer comprehensive and ongoing counselling and support services, in association with managing the donor registers, to all donor-conceived people, recipient parents and donors, and their relatives, and that counselling be compulsory for: a donor-conceived person who is seeking identifying information about his or her donor; a donor who is seeking identifying information about his or her donor-conceived offspring; and a donor or donor-conceived person who applies to lodge a contact veto

**Recommendation 19:** That the Victorian Government introduce a mechanism by which identifying information about a donor can be released directly to a donor-conceived person, in appropriate circumstances

**Recommendation 20:** That the agency referred to in Recommendation 14 provide a letterbox service for donor-conception stakeholders, based on the service previously provided by the ITA

**Recommendation 21:** That if the Committee's recommendations are implemented, VARTA conduct a public information and awareness campaign advising the public of relevant changes in the provision of information to donor-conception stakeholders, particularly targeting pre-1998 donors

**Recommendation 22:** That VARTA continue its education and public campaigns role, with a particular focus on encouraging and supporting the parents of older donor-conceived children to tell their children about the circumstances of their conception

**Recommendation 23:** That the Victorian Government introduce legislation to provide that destruction of, falsifying or tampering with, any records that identify parties to donor-conception, is an offence

**Recommendation 24:** That the Victorian Government introduce legislation to require that persons or organisations that hold records containing information on pre-1988 donor-conception provide copies of the records to a central agency, and in the case of PROV, that pre-1988 donor-conception records be transferred to a central agency

# Vanish Voice

**Recommendation 25:** That the legislative changes proposed in Recommendation 24 be advertised in a public campaign targeting the medical profession

**Recommendation 26:** That the agency referred to in Recommendation 24 approach individual doctors who are known to have provided donor insemination services and obtain copies of records held by them, if any, containing information on parties to donor-conception

**Recommendation 27:** That the Victorian Government introduce legislation to transfer responsibility for the central and voluntary registers from the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages to the agency described in Recommendation 14

**Recommendation 28:** That the Victorian Government provide a facility within the voluntary register for DNA matching

**Recommendation 29:** That where records for donors or donor-conceived people are unavailable, incomplete, or ambiguous, the Victorian Government offer a concession for DNA testing if that person wishes to lodge DNA matching data on the voluntary register

**Recommendation 30:** That the Victorian Government provide regular reports to an appropriate inter-jurisdictional body, such as the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General or the Council of Australian Governments, on progress with the development and implementation of reforms to donor-conception legislation

## DONOR LINKING SYMPOSIUM

Presented by the Australian & New Zealand Infertility Counsellors Association in conjunction with the Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority and the Donor Conception Support Group

CROWN CONFERENCE CENTRE,  
MELBOURNE  
4 – 11 December 2011

Open to the general public and health professionals  
Info: <http://>

[www.humanreproduction2011.com/associated-meetings/anzica/](http://www.humanreproduction2011.com/associated-meetings/anzica/)

**Note:** Any changes to your details can be advised by email to [info@vanish.org.au](mailto:info@vanish.org.au)  
Please mark the subject as 'Change of Membership Details'.

## The view from one sperm donor

Clem Newton Brown (*The Age*, March 29) has it right when he says of donor conception as practised in the 1980's that this was an experiment which we got wrong and which we now need to correct. Like Peter Lewis, (*The Age* March 30), I was part of that "experiment". I was a sperm donor in the mid 1980s. I was motivated by altruism. I saw that I could help others and I felt good about doing so. It seemed very simple then. Now I realise that it is not simple at all.

I know that am the biological father of nine children. Two of my offspring live with me. Seven – offspring from my sperm donations - I have never met. I'm married now, I have children and I can see before me the whole process of the development of a person who is the sum of so many genetic and familial influences. At times I feel quite anguished that I have seven other children somewhere in the world who carry a part of me and my genetic and family background but over whose lives I have no direct influence at all. I wonder if they are alive, if they are healthy, happy, well cared for and loved. I hope that they are but all I can do is hope. One day I may meet some of them – maybe all. Who knows? Or maybe I will meet none and will forever wonder about them. The thing that I can do, and have done, is make myself available to meet those people if and when they wish to do so. I have joined the Voluntary Donor Register and have committed myself to being available - for exchange of medical and family history information, contact, meeting each other, or whatever. It is up to the children of my donations to do what they wish - when and if they wish.

Of course it will be complicated and challenging – for me and my family – if and when any of my donor offspring wish to meet me. However, I believe that I have a fundamental responsibility to those people to let them see and know something of their genetic and biological heritage. I see this as an issue of fundamental human rights – the rights of donor conceived people to know of their origins if and when they wish to do so. To my mind that human right outweighs the promises of anonymity which I and other sperm donors were given in the 1980's in the early days of donor conception. The doctors who gave those promises were well intentioned but I believe that they were wrong to deny donor conceived people access to knowledge of their genetic heritage. The parallels with adoption practice are strong. For years adopted people were similarly denied access to knowledge of their birth parents. That was changed by legislation – with safeguards and support mechanisms carefully built in as is the case with the recommended change to access to information about sperm donors. The sky did not fall in as a result of those changes. It will not in this case either – if handled carefully and sensitively by

all concerned.

Some sperm donors wish to retain anonymity. They may be frightened of disruption to their families or be worried that the children conceived as a result of their donations will make financial claims on them and their families. The latter is a misapprehension – as the law is very clear that this cannot occur. Disruption and unsettlement from the appearance of their donor offspring – maybe so. However, weighing that against the human rights of the donor conceived to have knowledge of their biological parentage – as the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry has done – must lead to a judgement that human rights are paramount in this case. The Inquiry has recognised these significant complexities and has made strong recommendations for safeguards and support for both donors and donor conceived. Specifically, the Inquiry recognised the importance of ensuring that there will be no unreasonable interference in donors' lives and recommended that both donors, and donor-conceived people, have the ability to place a veto on contact from each other. There are also clear recommendations for strong and effective counselling and support services for all who are impacted by donor conception. It will be crucial that these services are properly provided and maintained in order to assist people to work through the potentially complex circumstances of donor offspring making contact and connections with their biological parents.

This issue is about people. While there is legislation and administrative process and or procedure involved this is about people: the donors who, by making their sperm or eggs available to help others, have created lives and the people who have been born from the donations of sperm and eggs. As one of the people involved in the donor conception "experiment" of the 1980s - a former sperm donor - I support changes to legislation and practice which will enable donor conceived people to gain the fundamental human rights of access to information about their biological parents and their genetic and familial heritage. The recommendations of the Parliamentary Inquiry have set out a way in which that can be achieved while best treating the rights of all parties concerned.

Victoria can be a world leader in taking a compassionate and progressive and human rights based approach to the issue of granting donor conceived people access to information about their heritage. I do hope that the Parliament will do just that when it considers how to respond and act on this report.

**Ian Smith**

VANISH Committee of Management member

A version of this piece was published in  
*The Age* 9 April 2012

## VANISH support group dates 2012

### **ADOPTION TRIANGLE - MIXED SUPPORT GROUP**

Held at VANISH, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 100 Franklin Street, Melbourne, (nearest corner – Elizabeth & Franklin Streets)

This group is held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of each month

TIME: 7.30 – 9.30pm      14 August                      11 September | 9 October              13 November  
| NEW VENUE: HOWARD STREET

### **ADOPTEE ONLY SUPPORT GROUP**

Held at VANISH, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 100 Franklin Street, Melbourne, (nearest corner - Elizabeth & Franklin Streets)

This group is held on the 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday of each month

TIME: 7.30 – 9.30pm      28 August                      25 September              | 23 October                      27 November  
| NEW VENUE: HOWARD STREET

### **BALLARAT MIXED SUPPORT GROUP - under development**

(Adoptees, Natural Parents, Adoptive and Alternative Parents)

Contact the VANISH office for information—1300 826 474 or 9328 8611

### **NEW SUPPORT GROUP FOR DONOR CONCEIVED PEOPLE**

This support group is for donor conceived people, 18 years and older

TALK / SHARE / THINK / LISTEN / SUPPORT / EMPOWER

Lauren Burns (donor-conceived person and VANISH committee member) and Kate Bourne (counsellor and education officer at VARTA) are facilitating a new group for donor-conceived people 18yrs+

Held at VANISH 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 100 Franklin Street, Melbourne (nearest corner - Elizabeth & Franklin Streets)

TIME: 7.30 – 9.00pm                      30 August (Franklin Street)                      25 October 2012 (new venue)

If you have a question related to this area please contact Kate Bourne, Senior Community Education Officer, VARTA phone 8682 1069 or Coleen Clare, Manager at VANISH phone 9328 8611 and they will try to assist you RSVP or enquiries [kbourne@varta.org.au](mailto:kbourne@varta.org.au)

### **RICHMOND BASED FORGOTTEN AUSTRALIANS' SOCIAL and SUPPORT GROUP**

Held at *Open Place*, Suite 1, 8 Bromham Place, Richmond

Check the website for support groups in your area plus other activities

Telephone: 9421 6162 or 1800 779 379 [www.openplace.org.au](http://www.openplace.org.au)