

Virtus Health (on behalf of Queensland Fertility Group and Melbourne IVF)

MEDIA STATEMENT

Virtus Health is proud to be at the forefront of Assisted Reproductive Treatment (ART). We feel very privileged to have collectively helped Australian families conceive more than 50,000 babies in the past decade.

As a relatively new branch of medicine and science, ART is developing at a rapid pace, and practices have evolved significantly in the last three decades to meet with changing community standards. Virtus Health (QFG, Melbourne IVF) operates a modern and responsible ART service, and provides best practice, patient-centred care, and is at the forefront of medical research developing and implementing techniques and processes to continuously improve patient outcomes.

Virtus Health strongly supports establishing a national compulsory donor conception registry, that will enable donors and donor conceived people to choose to exchange information.

GUNN FAMILY

We acknowledge the difficulties that the Gunns have faced since we helped them to start their family and we are keen to work with them to find a mutually acceptable resolution.

QFG is unable to make public comments about the details of the Gunn family's legal claim while they are being considered by the Court.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

There is no single cause for autism spectrum disorder. The causes are highly variable and include genetic factors, in utero events, birth trauma and premature birth. In the majority of cases a specific cause cannot be identified.

We are grateful when families advise of a clinical diagnosis for donor conceived people and treat these cases with the utmost professionalism and respect.

In August 2021, we were separately informed by two families that their donor conceived people had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

When we were advised, our nominated clinical geneticist, Medical Director and donor team determined whether it was clinically appropriate to notify families with children who were genetically related to the child with the diagnosis.

The donor was consulted and advised us that he had no family history of autism.

At that time, the nominated clinical geneticist reviewed both diagnoses and advised that there was no clinical requirement to notify other families with children conceived from the donor's sperm.

Subsequently, in 2023, we were informed by another family that their children, conceived using the same donor as the other families, had been diagnosed with autism.

The nominated clinical geneticist reviewed all three cases and then advised that families who had donor conceived people from the donor should now be informed of the diagnosis, and that the donor's sperm should only be available for family extension.

Patients who have previously used the donor for the conception of their children and wish to extend their family using the same donor, are required to undertake further clinical and genetic counselling so they have all relevant information to make informed decisions as to whether to proceed.

By November 2023, we had advised all patients with donor conceived people from the donor of the clinical diagnosis of autism.

Following further questions by Four Corners, Virtus Health further added:

We contacted all recipient families of the donor to arrange to advise them of the diagnosis and offer an appointment with our Clinical Geneticist. All but one of the families has contacted us and been advised.

MELBOURNE IVF

Melbourne IVF received correspondence from VARTA in December 2018 and undertook an investigation which confirmed that a donor had made donations with multiple ART providers under different names in the early 1980s. Current donor vetting processes have vastly changed since that time and would prevent this from happening today.

Further to the correspondence from VARTA, in early 2019 we received a letter from a donor conceived person related to the donor, which contained important personal health information.

We wrote to recipient families and 64% of them received the registered post letter, and more than 90% of those families contacted Melbourne IVF.

We informed VARTA about which recipient families had been contacted and we continue to update them.

We continue our efforts to contact the recipient families who did not respond to our original letter, so that we can disclose all relevant health information as it relates to this donor.

We rely on recipient families to provide us with current contact information and, in addition, we seek other secure ways, such as VANISH, to determine correct identifying details for donor conceived people.

For donors registered with Melbourne IVF, three-point photo ID verification is required for all contact including at every sperm collection appointment at any of our clinics.

Under Victorian law donors are required to declare whether they have donated at another clinic or to another person or couple, therefore we notify any other clinic where the donor has provided a sample. This is to ensure family limits are adhered to.