

Comparing the UK and Germany - How different things are across Europe

We asked Claudia Brügge from Germany to do our back page Q&A for this issue. Her response was too long for just the back page but was so interesting we thought it justified printing in full. These three questions below relate to the situation in Germany and, combined with her other answers overleaf, give a fascinating glimpse into the wide differences between the two countries in their approaches to and understanding of donor conception.

What are the differences between the situation for donor conception families in the UK and Germany?

I think the UK is more than twenty years ahead of Germany. In Germany sperm donation is regulated only halfway. For example theoretically the sperm donor can be made a legal father, after a child contests the fatherhood of the DI-father. In practice there are around 110,000 donor conceived people in Germany and this case mentioned has never happened. But the ambivalent legal situation has been producing uncertainty and secrecy. Also the children's right to get to know their genetic origin is not protected enough through German law like in the UK, and we still have to fight for a central registry. These days most doctors won't give any information to the adult donor conceived people, if they ask for it.

Other differences are: in Germany egg donation is forbidden; embryo donation is some kind of not clear but has been at least discussed recently in public; lesbians and solo-women are often not accepted in fertility clinics.

But all these differences seem to change somehow. Germany is catching up. Nevertheless, generally thinking about assisted reproduction in Germany seems to me less pragmatic than in the UK. Maybe this is due to the huge influence of conservative forces of the church. Maybe anxiety of human breeding and eugenics is also a historical reason for being more restrictive in Germany.

You founded DI-Netz, a German parent organisation for donor conception families. What motivated you to do that?

First, personally I don't like hiding for things I've done. Being authentic is an important value to me (and in my job). Whoever uses donor conception, being open or not,

cannot escape the possible stigma and public opinion around it and this is very political. Second, I remember very well how difficult making the decision to use sperm donation was to me and how isolated we felt in this time.

Both aspects were my main motivation to think more in political and contextual terms of sperm donation. It is not just our personal situation. 2012 when we were sitting in a small support group of young families after donor insemination we talked about all these people who are still isolated with their decision yet and it became very clear to us that we shouldn't be the only support group in this country. We felt too invisible to other couples. One father in the group, a web designer, got the idea to put up a website and within a few minutes there was this new website with a map of Germany on it and soon there were flags tagged for everybody who was ready to be contacted by others.

In the beginning I was thrilled to imagine a map with flags all over the country, symbolising our readiness to be open. I'm still very touched when I look at this map on www.di-familie.de. At that time it became also very clear that it is not enough in Germany just getting in contact with people in a similar situation. In 2012 a member of our network had the chance to give a letter to the German chancellor with our main political demands to improve the German law. I think this was the starting point for our political activism.

What were the main challenges and achievements for DI-Netz?

In the beginning I found it quite easy to get together the few parent activists in the field. It helped a lot that we visited Walter und Olivia in London and attended a national conference of DCN in 2012. We copied your concept of a steering group, which



Claudia and family

was a very good decision. In Germany this group consists of ten parents. Every one of them gives high skills in a special area to our organisation and that is also a factor which makes us strong.

Offering preparation groups, counselling and producing material have been a good idea. Thanks also to Olivia and DCN for allowing us to translate "Telling and Talking" into German language. Internet forums already existed, the moderators are an important part of the steering group, too, and it makes the information flow. But most important is: In daily life and also in London we learned that being open and disclosing about donor conception will always be the core of our network. So we already put this value into the constitution paper of our organisation right from the start.

It took DI-Netz only three years to get our organisation into an expert position in public debates. To stay authentic and brave, talking in front of media at least sometimes but also very much networking in the field and reaching politicians helped to get us to the point we are now. Reading the international literature was also necessary and felt supportive. DI-Netz has especially been supported by eight honorary members who are international experts (Oliva Montuschi, Wendy Kramer, Ken Daniels and others).

Whenever we are unsure about the next steps it is very helpful to remember these experts in our background. The German counsellor Petra Thorn is one of them. Without her support the achievements of DI-Netz wouldn't exist on this high level. Overall the biggest achievement is the biggest challenge for DI-Netz at the same time: the speediness. The effectiveness of DI-Netz grew very fast, in part due to the fast information flow of the internet. The speed is sometimes kind of exhausting, also because nobody in the network is getting paid for their efforts.

Q&A

Claudia Brügge



Claudia is German and she and her husband are parents of a donor conceived daughter. She is a psychotherapist and co-founder and first chair of the parent organisation DI-Netz in Germany. DI-Netz is the sister organisation of the DCN and was started in 2013. We asked our questions in English as we knew Claudia spoke the language well, but were amazed (and grateful) when we received her replies written so articulately and with such fluency.

Q: Firstly, can you give a short history of your personal background?

A: My husband Ulrich Simon and I conceived our daughter through IVF with sperm donation. This was ten years ago, when I was 39. Before we made this decision it took us quite some time – in fact a couple of years – considering this option again and again while grieving our shared infertility. We talked about our situation very openly right from the beginning, also with our friends and families of origin. Maybe being a psychotherapist myself helped us but maybe this fact made us also some kind of hyper-mentalised too.

Friends and family members tried to comfort us with comments like: *“You have got interesting things enough in your life, people like you don’t need a child!”* or *“It is not meant to be!”* or *“Children aren’t always fun!”*. But today my husband and I are very, very glad that we found finally the courage for donor conception and took the risk that our family might look different or strange to some people.

Every single day we are so happy about our wonderful child and we never felt sorry for our courage to take this unconventional pathway. We don’t miss and grieve anymore a genetically shared child. We have just too much in mind that if we had one, this special girl wouldn’t have come into our life.

Q: What does your daughter think about what you are doing with DI-Netz?

Our daughter says, she doesn’t like me sitting at the desk and at the computer that much. To be honest, I don’t like this working at the computer either. Sometimes my husband Ulrich and I are joking that she’ll probably never accuse us for being donor conceived but for sitting hours at work for DI-Netz. But I also think she is kind of proud of her parents being so active and important for the network. She says, what she really enjoys most is meeting other DI-children.

She likes especially the weekend meetings, where we stay a couple of days in a youth hostel with other families. Some of the kids she really likes very much and calls them good friends. I like seeing her and us feeling relaxed about donor insemination. Feeling comfortable is also due to the fact,

that the identity of her donor is stored at a notary, where she can ask for it later if she likes to.

Q: What do you think the future holds in Germany?

A: In the near future the political debate about the right to know one’s origins and the installation of a registry will come further into the German parliament. The government has promised already three years ago, that they will give a law to donor conceived people to get to know the identity of the donor more easily. Hopefully, some time DI-Netz will also get funding for the growing amount of work our organization does for families before and after donor conception. Recently DI-Netz decided to support also families by embryo donation a bit, but the chance, that there will be a big common institution like the DCN shared by all families of all kinds of donor conception, is still far away. With our resources now, this would be too much strain.

Q: You must have met a lot of families at your meetings. Do you have a funny story?

A: I don’t remember a special one, though we usually laugh a lot during our meetings. Once, the men were joking, presenting themselves all the time proudly as powerful “Azoospermator” (like “Terminator”), making ironical reference to the usual deep sadness, secret and stigma of their male infertility and to male power at the same time.

From a German perspective I found it also funny that while attending the DCN conference 2012 a woman at the information table – with all these wonderful books and videos we Germans envy – apologised very much being only able to offer the old version of a DVD “just about donor insemination”. She said sorry for not offering yet the revisited and extended version about families of egg donation, embryo donation etc. She didn’t know whom she was talking to: I felt that donor insemination in Germany is still some kind of very new and pioneering, but here in this situation DI seemed to be just one old version, Germany was far behind the moon. For me watching at this table with all these resources about DI it felt more like big and amazing Christmas.

