Anonymous Confession: “I lied my ass off to become an egg donor”

I take prescription mood stabilizers twice a day. I’ve abused cocaine and Adderall, and spent years smoking pot to deal with severe depression and anorexia. My family history includes ovarian cancer, schizophrenia, intellectual disability, Alzheimer’s, drug addiction, obesity, and even early hair loss.

But last year I was struggling to make ends meet and support a household with a salary of $34,000 in New York City.

**So I lied my ass off to become an egg donor.**

Before I start, I want to admit that sharing this story — albeit anonymously — really scares me. But I want to open up a discussion about the “screening standards” agencies have in place, and how the financial compensation egg donors are offered incentivizes lying.

I’d also like to say that I am in NO WAY suggesting that all egg donors have done this. In fact, some egg donors would be horrified to learn that others have concealed blemishes on their profile to make the cut. Although I have to admit, I do not think that what I’ve done is particularly rare.
This is my story…

**Agencies often boast about their “rigorous” and “intense” screening process for donor egg candidates. I’ve seen directors of lucrative egg donor agencies brag about how they reject 90% of applicants.**

Because of this, I assumed they would ask for releases to obtain old medical records to verify the information provided on my application, and I wondered whether they might even want releases to question my relatives.

So it was with great anxiety that I left off the schizophrenia, intellectual disability, Alzheimer’s, and baldness. I felt that I had to admit the family history of ovarian cancer, substance abuse, and obesity because these things were in my own medical records. But I minimized the details—for example, I said my mother had ovarian cancer in her late 40s (she was diagnosed at 35).

My own history, though, was harder to conceal or minimize. Thanks to ten years of self-injury, I needed only to roll up my sleeve for bloodwork in order to reveal that I had a serious history of mental illness.

And again, I thought the agency would go digging for old records.

To prove that my scars were not the result of an inheritable mental illness, I cited some made-up early childhood trauma as the source of my teenage angst and self-injury.

I also went to a new doctor’s office to get a Pap smear (required by the agency) and told the staff that I do not take any medications, because my most recent Pap – only six months old – listed the mood stabilizers under “current medications.”

Then I set to work minimizing my personal history on my application. I shortened the length of time I self-injured, downgraded the depression to “moderate,” downgraded the drug use to youthful experimentation, and omitted the 5 years of cigarette smoking.

Oh yeah, and I lied about my number of past sexual partners.

**When I went in for my initial interview, I was almost sick to my stomach with dread.**

I hate talking about my self-injury; in fact, the only person with whom I’ve ever discussed it openly is my spouse. It should show how desperate I was for that $10,000 that I swallowed my shame and talked about it with a total stranger.

I was also braced to go over my not-so-candid written application and to sign releases for the agency to get pediatric records.

The agency didn’t ask for a shred of proof of anything I reported.

I was stunned as I walked out an hour later with referrals for the standard physical screening and psychological evaluation. Both the donor coordinator and the psychological evaluator agreed my past history of mental illness was caused by early trauma rather than bad genes.

The maternal ovarian cancer history gave the agency pause, but in the end they approved me, and I went through two successful cycles for a total compensation of $20,000.
I was particularly scornful of how the psychologist asked me about my income and debts so the agency could “ensure” that I was not donating out of financial desperation.

“Well, I have a college degree and a full-time job, and no credit card debt,” I said. (Those things ARE true.) I went on, “I can’t imagine how anyone could go through all the effort of egg donation just for money. It’s so much more meaningful than that; it’s about helping to make a family.”

In my head I was thinking, ‘Please. I couldn’t care less whether a rich stranger has a baby, and you are offering ten grand because you know that.’

And at this point you’re probably thinking I’m some lying, greedy villain. You’re probably thinking you wouldn’t want my eggs – it would be a terrible thing if your child turned out like me.

It’s not that simple. I have a masters degree and graduated with honors. I make so little money because I’m a social worker in a pediatric cardiology unit; I spend 50 hours a week helping children with life-threatening heart conditions and their families, and I love it. I’ve worked on LGBT rights, domestic violence legislation, and other social and political causes. I have a successful marriage and great friends and family. And even in the worst years of my mental illness, I was a straight-A student and varsity athlete.

All of this lying is highly uncharacteristic, actually. I’m not proud of it. But I needed the money and I talked myself into it, trying to justify it.

They know they’re asking us to lie, I told myself. I’m smart, attractive, and successful – isn’t that all the Intended Parents care about?, I told myself. It’s not like the Intended Parents would have perfect family medical histories either, I told myself.

Overall my family background is pretty good, I told myself. Grandparents all lived into their 80s. I have close relatives who are doctors, engineers, military officers, marathon runners, and artists, and at least two relatives are certified geniuses.

But the fact is that I was sick to death of living paycheck to paycheck, and when I thought about the opportunity to earn more money in four weeks than I would normally earn in four months, my scruples crumbled in the face of temptation.

I know I’m not the only donor to lie during the screening process. And the agencies know it too. It would have taken this agency a few minutes of extra work to fax a request for my medical records to my past doctors, and the agency probably would have uncovered lies.

But I don’t think egg donor agencies want to uncover lies.

The fact is that hardly anyone has the kind of squeaky-clean medical history that affluent intended parents expect from egg donors. Agencies have to know that there wouldn’t be enough egg donors to meet demand if they fact-checked our applications. And without egg
Another egg donor who confessed to me about lying on her application (she omitted two relatives with autism) pointed out, “My worry is that some donors may falsify medical information that could put them at higher risk — risk of cancers, risk of endometriosis — and so forth.”

Because the thing is, risks of egg donation aren’t the same for everyone – certain pieces of the donor’s family history, such as endometriosis and reproductive cancers, can make the egg donor vulnerable to terrible consequences.

Look at two-time egg donor Leah Campbell’s experience in which she developed a rapidly aggressive case of Stage IV endometriosis, a condition in which uterine tissue grows outside the uterus. Endometriosis runs in families and is fueled by estrogen – the hormone that skyrockets during a donor egg cycle.

In Leah’s case, she didn’t even lie; she only found out after donating that relatives had, in fact, suffered endometriosis.

Another egg donor was rejected by an egg donor agency due to a family history of breast cancer – the donor coordinator told her that “…exposure to increased levels of estrogen through the donation process could potentially put you at greater risk for breast cancer when there is a close family history of premenopausal breast cancer.”

Plenty of prospective egg donors, desperate for that post-retrieval paycheck, could omit things like a family history of endometriosis or breast cancer to increase their chances of being matched, without realizing they are placing themselves at risk.

Prospective egg donors, you should probably do the right thing and be candid in your applications. And if you have a family history of hormone-sensitive conditions, you probably shouldn’t donate. But who am I to tell you this?

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About the Author

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2 comments

LAURA
June 4, 2014 at 5:21 pm - Reply
Wow. A very revealing look at egg donation done the wrong way. I respect her honesty to talk about it now, as well as point out lesser known facts (ie, why you shouldn’t donate if you have hormone sensitivity in your family), but I can’t get past the lying.
JULIA
June 5, 2014 at 1:04 am - Reply

Eeeeeeek!!! This makes me sick to my stomach 😒 Mental illnesses wreck havoc on the entire family—not just the child. That’s a very serious thing to lie about. I also respect the author’s honestly and I’m sure it does happen…but how can you feel good about your donation if you knew you lied? Shame on the agency.