

CORRECTED VERSION

LAW REFORM COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access by donor-conceived people to information about donors

Melbourne — 5 December 2011

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Witness

Mr P. Ruff.

The CHAIR — My name is Clem Newton-Brown. I am the chair of the Law Reform Committee. This is a joint parliamentary committee, as you are aware.

Mr RUFF — I heard you inform the other witness earlier, and I am happy to skip that because time is limited. I respect your time. When I heard of this being opened up I sent something; I think you can find my name in the back of the first report. At the time my employment did not allow me to attend. I knew this was available and I worked until 5 o'clock this morning, got a couple of hours sleep and here I am.

Ms GARRETT — Thank you, Paul.

Mr RUFF — I just wish to give you a bit of information if I can, please. I donated at the Royal Women's Hospital back in 1978. At the time I had to sign to say I would never investigate, the door would be closed, I would never know. I was happy with that. We got to the end of the first donation lot and they said, 'We want to send it interstate' so I was asked if I would mind donating some more. So I did. Then the door closed and I never heard anything else. Back in the 1980s when Ramona Koval was still at ABC in Melbourne she was running a bit of a program and I discussed with her a few things about it. At that time I had been in contact with Jenny Blood who was holding the register at the Royal Women's. She was able to tell me there were three girls and a boy but not allowed to tell me any more. I did have my file noted at that time that I was happy to be approached, should they ever wish. I have a 27 and a 28-year-old now. I respect their privacy. In the case of my 27-year-old son, he is happy for me to go down this path. My 28-year-old daughter is not quite as happy. We have a few legal disputes going against one of our dogs. We were walking down the street one day and told this woman to stay away. She approached our dog, it jumped up, she bit her lip, so I am going through the courts. That is why I am not in the newspapers with the past donors and it is not being run as hard as it could be.

If I can just say that a lot of what Ken said I would back 100 per cent. I have no right. I do not seek a right to go and investigate. Where I am coming from is, no. 1, the fact that there was a register held by the Royal Women's, and I understand that all the other clinics also had registers. They have been maintained, donors have been given access to update their personal details and these have eventually been handed on through several steps to Births, Deaths and Marriages. There is now a program encouraging previous donors who have not been contacted to make a bit of a synopsis about themselves. 'Here I am, this is me. This is where I come from, this is my family background'. On my wife's side of the family there are three kids with cystic fibrosis. Luckily we do not have any of that on our side, but at the same time I am aware that with genealogy and everything else a lot of kids are looking, particularly as adults as we get on. We are all parents at one time or another. There is a tooth fairy, there is Father Christmas and there is the Easter Bunny and eventually you end up like Donald Rumsfeld. Somebody has got to eventually tell the truth somewhere at some time, so I can understand how a lot of these parents who were the recipients back then are still finding it very difficult.

In my own case it was at a restaurant one night. Our children were about 13 or 14, and I just said, 'By the way, there are four more kids'. It was just before my father died, and I would have liked him to see them too if there was a possibility, but there was no possibility of extending that. Since then my kids have been aware of it. My daughter occasionally throws it up at me when we are having a spat, but my son is happy to let things run.

There have been several articles in the *Sunday Age*, and one of them referred to a Paul from Kyneton; that was myself. It ended up in a shit fight, if I can use that phrase, with my wife and my daughter, because with everything else that is going on they are saying, 'Just keep your head down. We don't need any more', whereas my son took the attitude, 'Come on! I know where you're coming from. I respect it, and you're trying to help those people that resulted'. Fair enough! We moved on from there.

Ms GARRETT — Have you been contacted by your — —

Mr RUFF — I have never been contacted. It was 1978, the donations were made about June/July, so we are talking 33½ years almost. I just wonder how those parents are coping, because eventually — —

I saw *Love Never Dies* on Saturday night. In the final scene, if you have not seen it, the woman gets shot, and as she is dying she says to the kid, 'Hey! He's not your father; here's your father'. We have all heard lots of stories about how kids who are adopted are told. Some are told young. I will admit to my own personal immaturity when I found out one of my best school mates was adopted and I did not react the way I would react today. That said, I have heard of others who have not been told properly. I have heard of some women who have been told on their wedding day and the wedding was a disaster, the marriage was a disaster and things like that. Others

include where the parents have died and another relative will come in and say, 'By the way, here is the truth'. I believe that there could be a program to encourage those people to take some counselling. Not open up — I am not asking them to open up. Where I am coming from is: I inflicted something on that life. If they cannot handle it, I would like to stand up and say I assisted them once, can we assist them again? Maybe your form could do something along that line. It has to go back to the records, and the records are there.

As I said, Births, Deaths and Marriages requests that past donors provide some info, a life story, a synopsis. I am not sure if in the first I actually produced the letter. I wrote something some years ago, 'How was your weekend. My weekend is always the same; I donated, and I know four kids resulted'. I wonder. I worked in juvenile justice, and I have worked security on nightclubs. I have done a lot of things. I have been middle-level management at a national headquarters at Telecom, and I have seen a lot of people go through and a lot of people doing it hard and some cruising. As for my offspring I do not want to interfere in their lives, but if they want to know about me and they want a hand and I can give them a hand, I am only too happy to do so. To that end, I am seeking to just inform you where I as a donor am coming from.

If you go back to Jenny Blood, who was at the dinner on Saturday night. I have never met Jenny but I have communicated with her on several occasions via phone, email and snail mail. There are records there, and somebody might be able to do something and you have just got to decide. We are all movers, in our work in our locations in life we move around; why does it move, and does it stay still? There have been a number of times I have listened to late-night radio; I drive trucks at night. I apologise, because I woke up this morning feeling pretty crook. I had some strawberries from a roadside stall yesterday, and I think that is why I am crook, so please excuse my current demeanour. Dare I say, there are a lot of people out there doing a lot of things, but how do you tell people? How do you inform them and where do you move forward? Any questions?

Ms GARRETT — As a donor who understood they would have anonymity, you have grown, you have children of your own and your central view is that you believe it is in the best interests of the child, or that if the child wants to know, they should be able to know.

Mr RUFF — Yes. I am not going to force it on them. At the time I had been a blood donor for a long time. I have done over 500 blood donations, because I see it gives someone a chance. If I can keep fit and well and continue to donate then I will continue to help others that need the assistance I can provide. It is the same with sperm donation — you know, give someone a chance. If they want to move forward, good luck.

The CHAIR — So you do not think that the donor should have any rights to contact their offspring?

Mr RUFF — I go back to the legal point. I signed a document that said I would never claim, so therefore I cannot now stand up and say, 'Hey! I want'. If the law was changed, if somebody wants to approach me, I am happy to follow that path.

The CHAIR — Putting aside that issue, is that something you as a donor would like to be able to do?

Mr RUFF — As I say, my 27 and 28-year-old have their own lives. I do not see them every day; I do not ring them every day. There have been times in their lives when we have been estranged. The other people are living their lives; if they want to meet me, I am here.

The one thing that did come out of yesterday was the fact that I met two other sperm donors for the first time in my life. There has never been a forum. I am not saying we want a piss-up or a party. The reality is there was nothing for us. You only do it to get your 10 bucks a throw or whatever, and the door is closed.

Ms GARRETT — Did you find that the sperm donors you met had similar experiences and feelings to you? Were you able to talk about those?

Mr RUFF — One of them had one of the resultant adults with him.

The CHAIR — I think probably all of the donors who we have seen — probably half a dozen, I suppose — every one of them I think has made the comment that it has had a massive impact on them and far more than they realised at the time.

Mr RUFF — The actual donation or the reality of the birth or — —

The CHAIR — Just the reality of what they have done and that it does not just stop with the donation.

Mr RUFF — I agree. It is a life that is ongoing, and I am totally aware of that. Kate — I am sorry, I am not sure of her surname — in her speech yesterday went to great length, and I will support her in any way I can. The *Age* journo was there, so we had a chat, because there might be something else that they might be able to dig up to get a bit more enthusiasm around and getting to know people.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that.

Mr RUFF — My pleasure. I wish you well. It is a heck of a decision. A lot of people are going to say, ‘No way’ to some of it.

Ms GARRETT — Thank you for your time.

Witness withdrew.