

People take 'underground' route to conception

Sperm donors operating in a gray zone

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Handsome. Double-eyelids. High-bridged nose. Athletic. 165cm/55kg. DMs are welcome.

At a casual glance, the Twitter profile of Keita Yoshizawa, 34, might read like he is trying to land a relationship online. What he is soliciting, however, is not a romantic partner, but a recipient for his semen.

On a recent chilly November evening, Yoshizawa (not his real name), having traveled all the way from his home in the Tohoku region, was waiting at a nondescript business hotel in Tokyo's Ueno district for the arrival of a client he met on social media. This type of rendezvous is a common occurrence for Yoshizawa, but he largely keeps the meetings secret from those close to him.

The meeting typically goes like this: Yoshizawa, upon the arrival of his recipient, ejaculates into a sterilized cup in a private room. He then hands over the cup to his client — these range from spouses grappling with male infertility to lesbian couples and women who want to be single mothers by choice — so they can self-inject his semen with syringes.

After a six-hour interval, they repeat this process to increase the chances of pregnancy. Again and again the cycle goes, until their appointment, which is booked for hours or even days to coincide with a client's estimated ovulation date, ends.

"Some people seek me out, all desperate, and say I'm all they've got," said Yoshizawa, who wished to be identified only by his pseudonym — one that he uses for his activity as a sperm donor — for fears of a backlash over the controversial nature of what he does.

"It's truly fulfilling to be able to make someone's dream come true by helping her get pregnant," he said. "What gives me joy is the idea that I may be able to provide a breakthrough for someone's life."

Yoshizawa is among a growing tribe of men who tout themselves as sperm donors on the internet, using their virility for what they claim is a charitable cause to help

women get pregnant. Today, many of those in search of a third-party's sperm go online and search through the sea of Twitter profiles and personal blogs in hopes of finding an ideal donor, oblivious — or sometimes simply resigned — to the health and safety risks that stem from such an arrangement.

Many donors claim to offer their semen for free, although Yoshizawa, as a self-employed worker, is upfront about the fact he asks recipients to compensate for his time — ¥1,400 an hour plus transportation and other expenses.

Japan has no comprehensive law that spells out rules for assisted reproductive technology, such as sperm and ova donation.

In the closest step ever toward crafting such a legal framework, however, the Diet passed a bill in early December that recognized

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SPERM DONOR
KEITA YOSHIZAWA

married couples who have children through donated eggs and sperm as legal parents. Specifically, the law said a husband who consents to his wife giving birth with donated sperm

cannot deny that he is the child's father.

Unlike countries like the United States, Japan doesn't have an established system of commercial sperm banks. In their absence, medical institutions have long steered the practice of sperm donations, amassing samples needed for a reproduction technique known as artificial insemination by donor (AID) — by which the sperm from a safe and anonymous donor is deposited into a woman's uterus — since as early as 1948.

But the recent growing momentum abroad for recognizing the rights by AID-conceived offspring to be told of their origins and learn about their biological fathers has threatened the anonymity of donors, scaring away many potential contributors. The resulting donor shortage has forced clinics nationwide to scale back or suspend AID.

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Sperm donors operate in a gray zone in Japan

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Keio University Hospital is among those hit the hardest by a shortfall in donors. The hospital has long spearheaded AID treatment in Japan, accounting for nearly half of all procedures conducted nationwide.

But in 2017, it updated its consent form to caution potential donors that their anonymity may be in jeopardy if children fathered by their sperm initiate legal action in the future to demand disclosure of their information.

This warning triggered a serious donor shortage, with the result that the annual number of AID procedures performed at the Keio hospital plummeted to 481 in 2019 from 1,952 in 2016, according to statistics provided by the university. The crunch has led the hospital, which was struggling to keep up with demand for the treatment even before the 2017 policy change, to stop accepting new AID patients altogether.

"People go underground with their internet search for sperm donors or otherwise look overseas to consider commercial sperm banks because domestic medical facilities haven't been able to satisfy their needs," Mamoru Tanaka, a professor at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology in Keio University School of Medicine, said. "Even the Keio hospital, the biggest AID operator of all, is no longer accepting new patients."

Donor anonymity

As such, demand is growing for self-styled sperm volunteers like Yoshizawa. Partly aided by the absence of a law that regulates their activities, such internet-based sperm trading has essentially gone unchecked.

A quick search for keywords such as *seishi teikyō* (sperm donor) now leads to hundreds of accounts on Twitter that tout the superiority of their genes, including their good looks, athletic talent and elite academic degrees.

In a reflection of the soaring demand, Ton Bebe, a "matchmaking site" that connects anyone willing to volunteer sperm to those who need it, currently boasts about 1,400

registered donors and recipients, up from the barely 100 members from earlier this year, according to software engineer and site operator Shizuka Kakimoto.

These donors most commonly go with the "syringe method" that involves them hand-delivering semen in a cup to recipients. An alternative is what is known as the "direct method," where they impregnate women through sexual intercourse.

Having started as a sperm donor in June, Yoshizawa, who mostly sticks to the syringe method, says he has successfully helped one woman get pregnant. He says he has so far donated to seven couples.

Among his other recent clients is a Tokyo couple in their 30s. The transgender husband and his wife, both of whom asked to remain anonymous for privacy reasons, say the internet was not their first — or not even their second or third — choice as they initially weighed options on how to get sperm.

"I knew there were some guys who were offering up their sperm for free, but their websites looked all fishy and creepy to me, so I vowed to myself that I would never ask for their help," the husband recalled.

But they soon realized they didn't have much of a choice.

Those eligible for AID procedures are defined by nonbinding guidelines by the Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology as a "legally married husband and wife" — a proclamation that has traditionally resulted in lesbian couples and single mothers being turned away by hospitals. With transgender people now able to legally change their sex, the Tokyo couple got officially married in 2018 and therefore are technically eligible. But in some hospitals, married couples battling male infertility are still prioritized, according to Mikiya Nakatsuka, a professor of reproductive medicine at Graduate School of Health Sciences, Okayama University.

Moreover, the two weren't comfortable with AID procedures because medical institutions keep donors strictly anonymous, denying patients any personal information about them, including their appearances.

"We wanted to make sure to have a child that looks like my husband," the wife said. The pair intend to tell their child of their biological origin — the fact that they were conceived by a third-party's sperm — at an early age, but still, "we want to avoid our kid getting hurt by being told by others that they don't resemble either one of us."

Risks galore

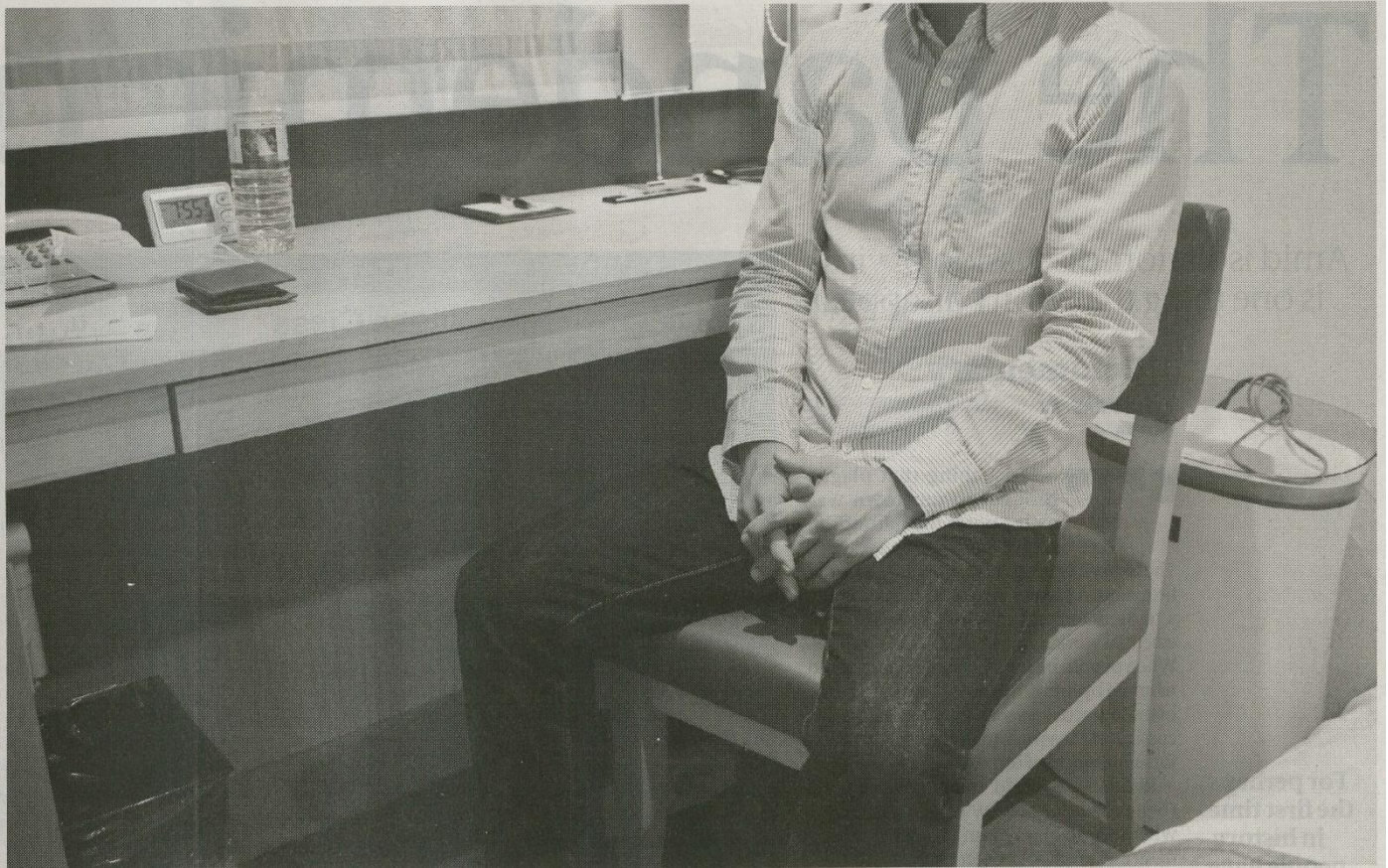
The two also considered sperm banks in the U.S. and Denmark.

Sperm banks in the U.S., for example, are far more forthcoming than hospitals in Japan about personalizing donors, providing details such as photos, recorded audio of their voices and other tidbits about their physique and hobbies, according to Riko

A transgender man (right) and his wife use a smartphone app in Tokyo to estimate the timing of their next ovulation date, which they ensure will coincide with their visit to a sperm donor they have matched up with on social media.

TOMOHIRO OSAKI





Ishihara, president of Los Angeles-based infertility counseling firm Miracle Baby.

The couple, however, gave up on using those banks at the realization of how costly and cumbersome the process would be. One vial of donor sperm sold at U.S. banks typically costs around ¥100,000, with the whole procedure until pregnancy, including in vitro fertilization using donor sperm, often amounting to several millions of yen, Ishihara said.

There were also no close male friends or family members that they could ask to be their donors.

Desperate, they settled for searching on social media — an option that, as much as they abhorred it at first, at least allowed them to directly meet and vet candidates.

After two unsuccessful interviews, they finally connected with Yoshizawa.

Upon meeting him in person, his “affable air” and “facial characteristics fairly close to my husband’s,” as the wife put it, immediately won their hearts. The fact Yoshizawa is placing a cap on the number of children he will ever father as a donor at 10, to minimize the risk of accidental incest among his offspring in the future, has further added to their confidence in his sensibilities.

As the couple’s estimated ovulation date approaches, the two now make a monthly trip to see Yoshizawa at a Tohoku hotel, where the donor — “in a secretive manner, sometimes with a slight look of embarrassment,” the husband said with a chuckle — hand-delivers a cup of semen to them every six hours or so during their three-day stay.

“The thing about this whole internet deal is that you actually get to see the donor,” said the husband. “I’ve met Keita only a few times now, but I can already feel an emotional con-

nection build up with him, even though I don’t know what his real name is or where exactly he lives.”

But relying on the internet to find donors isn’t without risks, including the tenuous safety of the semen on offer. Many volunteers, including Yoshizawa, seek to secure their recipients’ peace of mind by showing them in advance negative test results for sexually transmitted diseases.

But even if the test results are genuine, the risk of STDs cannot be ruled out unless the sperm is frozen for at least 180 days to allow the re-evaluation of donors. As such, institutions like the Keio hospital, for example, only use frozen sperm for AID procedures.

“It doesn’t matter how nice, kind and sincere you think the donor is. The risk is in the mere fact that you’re injecting into yourself sperm straight from someone’s body,” U.S.-based consultant Ishihara said.

“Strictly speaking, there is also no guarantee that the sperm the donor hands over to you is really his. You don’t even know with absolute certainty if it’s really semen that’s in a cup. What if some crazy person tried to harm you by spiking it with a dangerous drug or something?”

The Tokyo couple say they are aware of

those risks. But, they said, all they can do is trust their donor.

“This is our only way to have a child,” the husband said. “I wouldn’t recommend this to other people but, at least for us, it’s a life-saver.”

DNA survival

Although the existence of internet-based sperm donors isn’t entirely unique to Japan, they aren’t as rampant in the U.S., where the culture of sperm banks reigns, according to Kyle Gordy, a Los Angeles-based donor.

The 29-year-old self-employed accountant describes himself as one of the most prominent private sperm donors in the U.S., having volunteered in the field for nearly seven years.

Although he donates for free, he says he takes seriously what he does, eating healthy, steering clear of drugs and taking “like 20 supplements a day.” He plans a visit to Japan early next year to help some women get pregnant.

So far, he says he has fathered 32 children, with another seven on the way. While he is open to occasionally hanging out with his children — he has met seven of them — he says he doesn’t want to take care of any of them because, as he explains, “I like freedom.” To this end, he has his recipients sign a legally binding contract that releases him of any child support responsibility.

While Yoshizawa says he is fundamentally motivated by a sense of altruism, Gordy isn’t shy about admitting part of his motivation stems from his own desire to create progeny and ensure the survival of his DNA.

“I was never planning on having kids on my own. So this is kind of like an alternative,” he said. “If I ever died, I would know that at least I did have offspring out there in the world... I won’t regret it because at least I had the kids.”

Keita Yoshizawa, who uses a pseudonym, is a social media-based sperm donor in Japan, and has so far donated to seven couples.

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MIRACLE BABY