

**BRIGHT CREATIVE
EGG DONOR**

Wanted by loving,
playful Boston
couple. We recycle,
floss our teeth, and
respect our elders.
Generous
compensation/
charitable donation.
Anal personality a plus.

Loving Couple
dark
kind
person.
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JEWISH EGG DONOR SOUGHT

Jewish couple will pay \$50,000
to 100% genetically
Jewish egg donor.

Is this egg worth

\$50,000?

A FIRST-EVER PEEK INSIDE THE SECRET SORORITY OF BRAINY, BEAUTIFUL WOMEN WHO ARE MAKING INFERTILE COUPLES' BABY DREAMS COME TRUE—FOR A PRICE

BY SHEILA WELLER

looking for egg donor;
hair, fair/med. skin,
hearted, sensitive
Will be handsomely
ted for generosity.

Most donations of human eggs (like the unfertilized one here) bring the donor roughly \$3,500. The couples who placed these ads in Ivy League college newspapers are willing to pay many times that to get genes that "match" their own.

ONE DAY LAST JUNE, A PH.D. CANDIDATE NAMED RACHEL,* A tall, sleek young woman with porcelain skin and pale blue eyes, packed a few of her "better outfits," made up an excuse to her friends about where she was going, boarded a plane and flew across the country. Her intellectual pedigree—she's attended three Ivy League schools, Harvard among them—had a great deal to do with why she'd been chosen for the highly selective secret mission. Yet the task at hand wasn't remotely intellectual.

A few days after her arrival, Rachel lay on a table, under general anesthesia, in a reproductive endocrinologist's office. A needle was inserted into her vagina and 17 of her eggs, ripened for release by weeks of fertility drugs, were sucked out of her ovaries for eventual fertilization and implantation into the uterus of an infertile woman.

For this act—for selling her genes—Rachel received about \$35,000. That's seven times the \$5,000 recommended cap the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) in Birmingham, Alabama, puts on egg donation, and 10 times more than the \$3,500 the average U.S. donor receives. What's more, during that same trip, Rachel met a second couple who want her eggs and are willing to match that close-to-\$35,000 figure—a price that "I now consider my minimum," she says.

Anna,* a junior at one of the nation's top private universities, with a bubbly personality and girl-next-door beauty, has set a less-flashy fee than Rachel—between \$15,000 and \$20,000—but she's prolific. Anna has donated her eggs three times to three different couples, and paid for two and a half years of college with her earnings. Now she is working with her fourth family, "and for that one," she says, "I'll raise my fee."

Rachel and Anna both come from upper-middle-class families. Both scored

1400 out of 1600 on their SATs. And both have the same egg broker (yes, such people exist): Darlene Pinkerton. It is Pinkerton's elite agency, as yet unnamed, that is changing the landscape of egg donation. (The word *donation* is key here. Federal law prohibits selling human organs, and while reproductive tissue is not technically covered by the ban, egg brokers prefer to play it safe and characterize money given to donors as compensation for their time and effort rather than payment for eggs.)

Close to 4,500 U.S. women donate their eggs annually. Pinkerton, however, has captured and refined a new luxury niche in this market: Her sellers are highly intelligent, academically ambitious, attractive young women willing to capitalize on their assets; her buyers are well-off, well-educated couples willing to spend tens of thousands of dollars for eggs that meet their specifications.

Players on both sides of this market prize their secrecy. For example, SELF's interviews with Rachel and Anna, which took months to arrange, had to be orchestrated by calling Pinkerton, who then forwarded the calls so that the women's phone numbers, hometowns and last names could remain unknown. But, quiet as it is, high-stakes egg donation is a growth business: In the less than two years that Pinkerton's

and on TV and radio talk shows. Then the story faded.

But the end of the media coverage was just the beginning for Darlene Pinkerton and her lawyer husband, Tom. Relative newcomers to the egg-donor business after years in real estate, the Pinkertons say they placed the \$50,000 ad merely to help a couple who were having trouble finding an appropriate donor through other agencies. The flood of 200 responses was unexpected. After the original clients selected their donor, many of the remaining applicants told the Pinkertons to keep them in mind for other couples. "What other couples?" Darlene Pinkerton says she and her husband asked each other. They quickly found out, as similar families called seeking premium eggs. The Pinkertons began placing ads for them, and, as responses rolled in, they developed a golden database: a file of 123 intellectually top-notch women willing to sell their eggs.

The Pinkertons run a unique operation. "I'm not aware of any other agency that claims it works solely with these high-academic donors," says Samuel Wood, M.D., a reproductive endocrinologist at the University of California at San Diego. "People know: Pinkerton is where you get brainy women." People also know that you have to pay for them. "Some of Pinkerton's prices are 10 times higher than other agencies,"

says Guy Ringler, M.D., a Santa Monica, California, reproductive endocrinologist who



Darlene Pinkerton, here in her home office, has made high-priced egg donation a reality. The major money-makers: her stable of intellectual stars—young, fertile women with off-the-charts SAT scores, who attended top U.S. colleges.

agency has been up and running, her donors have received a whopping \$614,500 for 32 egg removals—an average of \$19,203 per donation, with two donors earning \$50,000 each.

Such high prices are controversial in this already emotionally charged world of egg donation; yet Pinkerton has made them routine with almost nobody knowing about it.

REMEMBER THE MEDIA BROUHAHA

that erupted in January 1999 over the "\$50,000 egg" offer? A large display ad, placed in student newspapers at Harvard, Stanford, Yale and other top colleges, made an attention-grabbing proposition: "Intelligent, Athletic Egg Donor needed for loving family. You must be at least 5'10". Have a 1400+ SAT score. \$50,000." It seemed, to some, like capitalism-meets-eugenics. The ad campaign's ethics (or lack thereof) were debated in newspaper op-ed pages

did a retrieval (egg removal) on a \$30,000 Pinkerton donor. "I tell my patients, 'You don't have to pay [donors] such high prices.' But if a couple is very particular about educational background, they go to Pinkerton and pay the higher fee."

In the San Diego canyon where the Pinkertons live and work are five computers holding the cache of special donors. Couples can log in from the comfort of their own homes and scan for the genes they wish to use to create their child. (In most situations, the husband's sperm is used to fertilize the donated egg.) Each donor in the database is featured with a photograph and an exhaustive list of attributes: athletic abilities, college major, allergies, hair color and texture, right- or left-hand dominance. The list even covers the health and educational history of every grandparent, parent and sibling—in fact, the database holds practically everything about an applicant except her name. These

women are students or alumnae of the nation's top colleges: Amherst, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford, Yale, etc. Forty-four of them have SAT scores of 1400 or higher; another 27 have scores of at least 1300. (Nationally, only about 10 percent of women achieve such marks.)

A donor who has looks in addition to exceptional test scores is a special bonus. A young woman who got a 1590 on her SATs recently called Darlene Pinkerton, who asked her to send a picture. "I thought, This is too good; she can't be cute, too," Pinkerton says. "But when I opened the envelope and pulled out the picture, she was adorable!"

Once a couple expresses interest in a particular donor, they make their first payment to the Pinkertons, who charge a fee in addition to the money the donor will eventually get. Other egg brokers command roughly \$3,500 for their services; Pinkerton will say only that her fees are "about double" that of other agencies. Couples may also request additional information about a donor. Rachel was asked what level of tennis she played; Anna, the age at which she first needed glasses. Almost half of the couples ask to speak to the potential donor by phone; in about 10 percent of cases, the donor and clients meet. Such meetings are balancing acts orchestrated by the Pinkertons. Donor and couple attempt to bond without exchanging last names (sometimes even the first names are coded), professions or cities while their lawyers are elsewhere negotiating for them over travel expenses, privacy protection and, of course, the donor fee. "We do everything possible to keep the family and donor from talking about money," Pinkerton explains.

The greatest initial determinant of a donor's fee may be her SAT score, "but all kinds of other considerations are involved," she adds. Sometimes a couple factors in the donor's personality and character. "Or it's something as sim-

"I had never formally considered egg donation before. It was the monetary factor that pulled me toward it."

—A donor who received about \$35,000 for her eggs

"We wanted to pull out all the stops...to get the most people possible to respond to our ad."

—A woman who is offering \$50,000 for eggs

her to spend all her time in the classroom. Rachel e-mailed the address listed on the ad. "I didn't take it too seriously," she says. "I knew tons of people were applying. I didn't think anything would come of it."


Something did come of it: the Pinkertons' eight-page questionnaire, a donor identification number for their database and then a long wait. Finally, last April, more than a year after she'd first seen the ad, "I got an e-mail from Darlene saying, 'We have a family who definitely wants you,'" Rachel says. She was surprised—and touched. In a letter the couple described why they were seeking a donor. "They said they had no children. You could tell a baby was very important to them. I got the sense that they were nice people," Rachel says. Still, she adds, "it was surreal. This is not the situation you're in every day."

Rachel decided not to tell anyone but her parents (who supported her decision) and two close friends "partly because I'm private," she says. But she also feared disapproval. She remembered a conversation about egg donation in which an acquaintance had exclaimed, "I would never do that—let my genes be out there in the world somewhere!"

Rachel's next few months were a patchwork of her life as a student and the secret life she'd taken on as a Pinkerton egg provider. There was the back-and-forth negotiation: Rachel set her fee; the clients did not flinch. As is customary, they also agreed to pay for her airfare, medical insurance, hotel and meals. Then there were the blood tests—about four—to make sure she carried no infectious diseases. Finally there were two psychological tests to determine, first, her general mental-health profile and, second, if she could give her eggs away without regret. She knew she could. "I'm a person who doesn't get too involved or too connected," she says.

After all of that came the actual physical ordeal: boosting Rachel's egg generation and timing her ovulation cycle to the client's. To do this, Rachel had to inject herself daily for nine consecutive days with

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ple as, 'She looks just like my sister!'" Pinkerton says. Thus far, her lowest-paid donor has received \$7,500. At the top end, she says, five donors have received between \$30,000 and \$40,000, and two, of course, have snagged the biggest jackpot: \$50,000. At press time, all that money had produced three Pinkerton births and 26 pregnancies-in-progress, with six sets of twins among them.

THE \$50,000 OFFER IN THAT ORIGINAL

Pinkerton ad is what first caught Rachel's eye. "I had never formally considered egg donation before," she admits. "It was the monetary factor that pulled me toward it." With lots of schooling left—she's pursuing medical school in addition to her Ph.D.—she recalls thinking that egg donation "would beat doing any sort of job I could have." Few other kinds of employment would give her so much money while enabling

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powerful fertility drugs, which, simply put, would make her produce eggs less the way a woman does (one at a time) and more as a chicken would (up to 20 at once). Then Rachel would have to fly to another city, have her eggs harvested, sleep off the anesthesia and recover. The final caveat: She couldn't have sex (even with protection) for two weeks afterward, since she'd be so overfertilized that she'd be highly prone to pregnancy.

THIS PROCESS IS EXPLAINED TO EVERY donor who contacts the Pinkertons, and for many, it's a deal-breaker. "Half of the women [who answered the \$50,000 ad] dropped out once they learned what the procedure was like," says Pinkerton. "They said, 'You couldn't pay me anything to do this!'" Aside from the invasiveness and discomfort, there's also the worry about diseases donors might develop later. Doctors say the immediate health risks to women who donate are few. Speculation has swirled about a possible connection between fertility drugs and ovarian cancer, but no link has been proven.

Rachel was okay with the whole drill, except for one part: the general anesthesia she'd need for the retrieval. "I was a little apprehensive," she says. But she hung in there. Did the sizable sum of money she'd receive erase her doubt? "Yes, I think a little," she says. "That, and that it was a good thing to do. And I'd agreed to it. I never let my mind stray too far from, You already said yes; now deal with it."

So last June, while home with her parents for the summer, she began giving herself shots, mastering the art of the quick, daily skin-pop. (Anna, who also has kept quiet about all three of her retrievals, had to hide the injections from her college roommates. "I'd just go in the bathroom, discreetly close the door and give myself a shot in the stomach," she recalls. "At the time I thought it was hard, but it only took two minutes.")

Within a few weeks, it was time for Rachel's retrieval. Because the couple chooses the retrieval site, both Rachel and Pinkerton had to fly from their respective hometowns to a third location (Pinkerton with a check for Rachel in her bag).

Rachel was working a full-time sum-

mer job up until the day of her flight. "I was definitely a little stressed," she says. Bloating from fertility drugs, sitting on the plane, she couldn't avoid thinking about the consequences of egg donation—that, if all went well, "there would be a little me...or lots of little mes...out there." Ultimately, she concluded that her pragmatic stoicism would help her. "I usually let things roll off me pretty easily," she says. "I think that will protect me."

Rachel also had to face a new wrinkle: The clients had suddenly requested to meet her. Why now, when there were just seconds left in the countdown, so to speak? What if they didn't like her? "I told Darlene I was worried about their expectations," she says. After all, they were paying her a huge sum.

Pinkerton tried to allay Rachel's anxiety. "Usually, the clients just want to express their gratitude," she reassured her. And that turned out to be the case: The husband and wife showed up with flowers. "They were overjoyed," Rachel says. "They just told me how wonderful I was." Pinkerton recalls them commenting that Rachel was even more beautiful in person than in her photo. "It was this huge self-esteem booster," Rachel adds. Moved and relieved by the happy meeting, Rachel went to the fertility doctor's office and submitted to the general anesthesia. When she awakened, she was 17 potential offspring lighter and about \$35,000 richer.

Next, the doctor fertilized Rachel's eggs with sperm from the husband. A few days later, his wife arrived at the fertility clinic for implantation of two of the embryos; the rest were frozen for future use. Recently Rachel heard from the couple via e-mail. Their first in-vitro fertilization (IVF) cycle didn't take—no pregnancy. Even though Rachel's eggs probably had nothing to do with the failure, she feels for them. "At least they have a few chances left," Rachel says. Those are expensive chances—not just due to the donor and broker fees, but also because of the high cost for each IVF cycle: up to \$20,000.

For Darlene Pinkerton, such failures are among the hardest moments of her job. Sometimes the crisis comes when a donor simply doesn't produce enough eggs to make it possible to try for a pregnancy. Other times, a crisis results from the small window of time around ovu-

lation in which ripe eggs can be retrieved. "One donor was caught in a snowstorm on her way to the Denver airport," Pinkerton recalls. "The plane was grounded. She couldn't get to her retrieval in California, but the client had to pay her part of her fee, anyway.

"This is a very volatile field," she continues. "The emotions, the hormones, the money! Sometimes I leave the office in tears. But then I'll come in the next day and learn of a pregnancy and think: What a privilege it is to help create a family!"

"A PERSON CAN DO AN ALTRUISTIC THING AND BE WELL-COMPENSATED AT THE SAME TIME," SAYS PINKERTON. "THE TWO THINGS ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE."

THE ALTRUISTIC ACT OF HELPING TO "create a family" wasn't the first thing that most readers of the Pinkertons' original \$50,000 ad thought about. The ad, it seemed to many, was arrogantly aimed at creating the perfect baby. "It was the biggest news on campus," recalls *Harvard Crimson* business manager Adam Cohen. "It seemed like they were trying to find this *über*-woman."

Pinkerton says she and her clients were misunderstood. "They were looking for a baby that would fit into their family," she explains. "She's over 5'11". He's 6'5", and almost everyone in their family is a Ph.D." The couple came up with the \$50,000 price tag only after they computed the probability of finding the right donor randomly. They determined that "less than 1 percent of U.S. college women over 5'10" have SATs of 1400 or over," Tom Pinkerton says. "How would they find a matching donor?"

And as for the arrogance implied in such offers, a woman who, with her husband, is offering \$50,000 through an ad in college papers says nothing could be further from the truth: "We did it out of pure desperation. We wanted to pull out all the stops" in their quest for a baby that matched them intellectually and physically. "We wanted to get the most people possible to respond to our ad as quickly as possible. And it seems to be working."

Besides, the concept of a "matching" baby is valid, says Darlene Pinkerton: "No one wants a child who's constantly

being asked, 'Were you adopted?'" Another woman, who is currently advertising for a donor in Ivy League college newspapers, puts it this way: "My husband and I both have graduate degrees from very good colleges. Whatever genetics went into our ability to be gratified by education, we want our child to be able to enjoy as well."

But there is another motivation for seeking a "matching" egg. Many couples want a baby who will advance an almost irresistible white lie: that there was no

director of the Center for Surrogate Parenting and Egg Donation in Beverly Hills, recently gave her donors a raise from \$2,500 to between \$3,000 and \$10,000, in part because of competition from higher priced brokers like the Pinkertons. "Tom Pinkerton's a nice guy, but he's all about money," Synesiou says. She doesn't believe that the Pinkertons' original \$50,000 couple even exists. She says the ad was just a publicity stunt to launch the Pinkertons' agency. Any such egg donor, Synesiou argues, surely would have bragged about her astonishing windfall. (Both the couple and the donor have consistently refused to speak to the media.) More to the point, "I talk to doctors in town, and I go to ASRM meetings," Synesiou says. "I've said, 'Have you ever seen a donor earn \$50,000?' They say, 'Never heard of it.'"

But a California reproductive endocrinologist who asked not to be named told SELF that the re-

donor involved. With egg implantation, unlike adoption, the woman carries the baby to term. Friends and neighbors see her pregnant. Not surprisingly, many of these women don't go out of their way to share the baby's unusual genetic history, say fertility experts. "It is the standard in America" for couples to let people assume the baby is both the husband's and wife's biological child, says reproductive endocrinologist Michael Feinman, M.D., of Westlake Village, California, who performed one of the very first U.S. egg-donor retrievals in 1987. Dr. Wood adds that many of his egg-donation clients don't even confide in their regular doctors. They go to a fertility clinic for their IVF cycle and back to their ob/gyn for prenatal care and delivery, he says.

Given this widespread practice of secrecy, it makes sense that those who are spending the most money demand donors who seem most like them. The 200 potential donors who applied to help the Pinkertons' original clients were asked "not just if they were tall, but if their grandmothers were tall," in order to make sure the height gene was not recessive, explains Tom Pinkerton. Other clients have gone so far as to request that donors have a matching blood type.

MANY BROKERS AND DOCTORS THINK that such extravagant demands and offers are not only unnecessary, they're unseemly. And they disapprove of the rapid rise in donor fees. Karen Synesiou,

director of the Center for Surrogate Parenting and Egg Donation in Beverly Hills, recently gave her donors a raise from \$2,500 to between \$3,000 and \$10,000, in part because of competition from higher priced brokers like the Pinkertons. "Tom Pinkerton's a nice guy, but he's all about money," Synesiou says.

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(1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions	798,533	816,335
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D. Free Distribution by Mail	44,285	50,408
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H. Copies not Distributed	588,206	567,127
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I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete.
(Signed) Charles H. Townsend, Executive Vice President/Chief Operating Officer

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retrieval in question *did* happen. "I can confirm with a certainty that it took place," he says (though he couldn't say whether there was a successful pregnancy).

REGARDLESS OF SUCH ISSUES, THE ASRM raises an additional concern about these high prices: Are they so steep that women will leap, cavalierly, into egg donation? In a statement released last summer, the association said: "Payments to women providing [eggs] should be fair and not so substantial that they become undue inducements that will lead donors to discount [the] risks."

Indeed, when donors are paid high sums, the altruism that should prompt a donation (which sparked the whole idea of donor DNA in the first place) falls by the wayside, charges Dr. Feinman. Darlene Pinkerton disagrees. "A person *can* do an altruistic thing and be well-compensated at the same time; the two things are not mutually exclusive," she says. Her donors—"I'd be proud to have any of them as a daughter"—are very empathetic toward the clients' infertility dilemmas, she adds. "One of my girls with one of the highest [SAT] scores accepted the lowest fee. She was just a nice person who wanted to help someone get pregnant." Clients, too, have told Pinkerton they would feel "terrible paying less than what they paid for the donor's gift." Some, she says, actually offer more than they are asked. One couple, upon hearing that their donor had asked for the exact sum needed to pay off her student loan, gave her an additional \$8,000, "so she could have some money for herself," Pinkerton says. "People are far more kind and generous than we give them credit for."

Dr. Feinman is not impressed. He so disapproves of the Pinkertons' inflated fee scale that he says he would probably refuse to do a retrieval on a Pinkerton donor on principle. Besides, he says, reflecting a point made by others, who is to say that the "best" genes produce the "best" human beings? When asked if he believes that a woman who accepts just \$3,500 for egg donation is an inherently better person than one who takes \$30,000, Dr. Feinman pauses, then boldly answers, "Yes."

Such prejudice frustrates Darlene Pinkerton, who is no stranger to the stress her clients (Continued on page 185)

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are dealing with. She and her husband got into the business after going through years of fertility treatments before the birth-by-surrogate of their daughter, Kati, now 10. And Pinkerton's 28-year-old son from her first marriage, Ty, has suffered all his life from cystic fibrosis. Seven years ago, Pinkerton donated part of her lung to Ty to keep him alive.

DESPITE THE CRITICISM AND ABUNDANT crises, what keeps Pinkerton in business, she says, is the success of her matchmaking. Recently, she got to share with Anna the happy news that the young woman had hit gold with her third donation—there's a baby on the way. Anna's now not merely an "experienced" donor (her price can go up) but also a "proven" donor (her price can go up even more). Anna will be well-compensated for her next two retrievals—her last, if she does them, because there is general agreement in the medical community that as a health precaution, donors should limit themselves to five cycles.

Anna's inevitable exit from the golden database is sad for Pinkerton, who rhapsodizes, "Clients love Anna! I wish I could clone Anna. I wish I had 10 Annas!" But there is always Rachel, who has already said she will do a second contract "in a heartbeat." There are also the other 121 women in the Pinkerton stable—and a new crop of students entering Ivy League colleges every year.

On one thing both Pinkerton's friends and enemies agree: She has permanently altered the fertility business. For couples who surf the Pinkerton website, the dream-gene choices will keep growing. And behind every carefully coded computer file, there's a smart young woman willing to duck into a dorm bathroom to give herself a surreptitious fertility shot before flying across the country on a secret mission. All for a five-figure profit. ■

Sheila Weller is a contributing editor at SELF and the author of Saint of Circumstance (Simon & Schuster), about the Alex Kelly rape case.

Additional reporting by Katherine Davis.

How do you feel about high-priced egg donation? Participate in live chats December 11–18 at www.phys.com/go/egg.