

## Yes, top students reap rich rewards, even as egg donors

### Would-be parents want high scorers

By Stephanie Ebbert, Globe Staff | March 26, 2010

The Harvard Crimson was one of three college newspapers that ran an identical classified ad seeking a woman who fit a narrow profile: younger than 29 with a GPA over 3.5 and an SAT score over 1,400. The lucky candidate stood to collect \$35,000 if she donated her eggs for harvesting.

The ad was one of 105 college newspaper ads examined by a Georgia Institute of Technology researcher who issued a report yesterday that appeared to confirm the long-held suspicion that couples who are unable to have children of their own are willing to pay more for reproductive help from someone smart. The analysis showed that higher payments offered to egg donors correlated with higher SAT scores.

"Holding all else equal, an increase of 100 SAT points in the score of a typical incoming student increased the compensation offered to oocyte donors at that college or university by \$2,350," wrote researcher Aaron D. Levine.

The paper, published in the March-April issue of the Hastings Center Report, examined ads in 63 student newspapers in spring 2006 and was billed as the first national cross-sectional sample of ads for egg donors. The Hastings Center is a nonprofit, independent, nonpartisan bioethics research institute.

Anecdotal reports have long depicted eager prospective parents willing to pay outrageous sums for carefully screened donors of sperm or eggs, and stories of parents offering tens of thousands of dollars for eggs from geniuses or extraordinarily talented musicians pop up regularly.

The stories have alarmed some medical professionals and raised ethical questions. Concerned about eggs being treated as commodities, and worried that big financial rewards could entice women to ignore the risks of the rigorous procedures required for harvesting, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine discourages compensation based on donors' personal characteristics. The society also discourages any payments over \$10,000.

Levine's paper points out, however, that no outside regulator enforces those guidelines and that they are often ignored.

Of the advertisements Levine examined, nearly one-quarter offered donors more than \$10,000, and about one-quarter of the ads listed specific requirements, such as appearance or ethnicity, also in violation of guidelines that discourage greater payment for particular personal characteristics.

The ads that tended to have the highest correlation between compensation and test scores in Levine's study came from hopeful parents trying to find a donor on their own and from clinics advertising on behalf of a specific set of parents. The correlation was less strong in ads taken out by clinics advertising without a specific parent in mind.

The Hastings Center Report, published six times a year, explores ethical, legal, and social issues in medicine, health care, public health, and the life sciences. The issue of the report containing Levine's analysis also offers a counterperspective from John A. Robertson, who chaired the ethics committee of the American Society of Reproductive Medicine. He casts doubt on the notion that it is an ethical problem to pay more for eggs from a woman with a particular ethnic background or high IQ.

"After all, we allow individuals to choose their mates and sperm donors on the basis of such characteristics," Robertson wrote. "Why not choose egg donors similarly?"

Carey Goldberg, coauthor of the forthcoming book, "Three Wishes: A True Story of Good Friends, Crushing Heartbreak, and Astonishing Luck on Our Way to Love and Motherhood," echoed that thought, saying she realized when she chose a sperm donor 10 years ago that she could not choose most of the personal qualities she would want her children to have. Instead, she got to examine donors' height, weight, hair color, skin color, eye color, and level of education. The donor she chose, but didn't end up using, had an SAT score higher than her own, she recalled.

"Since most of the characteristics that we value in people, like kindness and creativity, aren't known to be genetically transmitted, I ended up deciding that intelligence and height are the two things I most wanted," said Goldberg, a former Globe science reporter.

Fertility clinics are required by federal law to report their pregnancy success rate but not what donors are paid. Agencies involved in donations say they are not purchasing eggs but compensating donors for their time and the ordeal they must undergo.

The four-month process for an egg donor involves screening — for infectious diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, toxicology, drugs, and even cigarettes — and psychological evaluations to ensure the woman is mature enough to grasp the commitment she is making. The donor must attend regular medical visits, including blood tests and ultrasounds, often requiring time off work and lost wages and childcare expenses if the donor has children of her own. Donors must give themselves nightly shots and have eggs retrieved through a catheter.

It "is a huge undertaking and commitment," said Amy Demma, founder of Prospective Families, a Wellesley agency that matches egg donors with recipient couples.

And parents are often willing to substantially increase the amounts they offer to persuade a high-test-score donor to go through with the process.

Levine's paper cites the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology, which polled its member clinics in 2006 and reported that the average compensation for egg donors was about \$4,200, with steeper rates in the Northeast. The society reported that 1 in 5 clinics said compensation could vary based on the donor's ethnicity or fertility history.

In some cases, donors set their own rates, typically asking about \$7,000, said Demma, who frowns on higher payments and said she turned down a family willing to pay a donor \$15,000.

"I am working with a lovely woman from MIT right now; her compensation is \$7,000," said Demma. But, she said, the occasional recipient parent will say, "I've got to pay \$20,000 because I want a smarter donor parent." Sometimes I can dissuade them. Sometimes they'll leave because they feel if they don't go to a Mercedes dealership, they're buying something less. What we're trying to do here is create a family." ■