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Egg Hunt

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Meeting the demand for human eggs.

Aimee is alone in her duplex, and the soft glow of her computer screen is the only light in the room. Her petite figure slouches in the chair and a tight knit hat covers her ponytail. While checking her e-mail and sorting through all the spam messages, Aimee notices one message about women earning money by donating their eggs. She doesn’t think twice, deletes the e-mail, and moves on to other tasks. When she finds herself still thinking about the message half an hour later, she Googles “egg donor” and clicks on the first link. She scrolls down. “DONORS NEEDED! The most generous personal and financial reward. Up to $6,000 paid.” Having always been a spontaneous person, Aimee begins filling out the online application to donate her eggs.

“Hair color? Eye Color? How many sexual partners have you had this year?” The application grows longer and more detailed. “How much alcohol do you drink? Have you ever seen a counselor? Have you ever suffered from depression?” She finishes and clicks “submit.”

The demand throughout the country for donor eggs is huge. And since women naturally produce their most viable eggs during their early-to-mid-20s, there’s always a high demand for female college students willing to donate.

But the entire process is much more rigorous than just filling out an online questionnaire. Potential donors have to weigh the positive of enabling a couple that can’t conceive the chance to have a family of their own against the negative of having children they will never see. And then there’s the money.

Due to the time and commitment required, donors are usually paid several thousand dollars. But the decision to donate isn’t always about money. For Aimee Schmidt, Alissa King, and Jeri Brinkman, all Iowa State students, the thought of helping others was the biggest motivation when signing up to donate their eggs.

Alissa sits on an uncomfortable floor in the long, cool hallway. Her tight curls of dark brown hair are pulled back in a bun and her dark features contrast with her bright white eyes. Alissa is early for class and restlessly adjusts her long legs against her chest. She opens her newspaper and browses the top stories when an unusual advertisement catches her eye in the classified section. “SEEKING EGG DONOR, loving couple searching for healthy, intelligent woman, 21+, compensation: $8,000.” Eight thousand dollars! She sits up straight and adjusts her eyes to read the ad again. She puts the idea in the back of her mind and goes to class.

Alissa’s interest is far from unusual. “The phone rings off the wall with people inquiring about donating eggs,” says Michelle Maifeld, donor egg research coordinator at the University of Iowa Women’s Health Center for Advanced Reproductive Care. “A lot of people are interested.”

Despite all the interest, there are only two fertility clinics that retrieve donor eggs in Iowa: the University of Iowa Women’s Health Center in Iowa City and the Mid-Iowa Fertility in West Des Moines. However, there are countless online programs that take donors from all over the country.
Much of the interest in donating eggs stems from the promise of lucrative compensation, ranging from $2,000 to $8,000 per egg. Donors, who remain anonymous, receive the money to compensate for lost time and medications they are required to take. The total compensation is ultimately based on the quality of eggs and can vary from clinic to clinic.

Alissa was thinking about the $8,000 compensation mentioned in the newspaper ad when she began looking into donor programs. A graduate student in sociology, Alissa says that when presented with a monetary incentive the idea of donating eggs is well worth it. She is working for Iowa State as a teaching assistant and can pay her bills, but extra money would take some weight off her shoulders.

This big-dollar figure was also what first caught Aimee's attention in the e-mail she received. Despite working 20 hours per week, Aimee, senior in dietetics, could really use the money. She survives mostly off student loans, already owing roughly $40,000. "Sometimes when you're tight on money, you think about doing everything," Aimee says. "Asking for money is humbling and humiliating. I wish I weren't in debt. I'd be even more willing to donate because I wouldn't be judged as if I were doing it for the money."

Jeri Brinkman sits with Paul, her boyfriend, on the couch at his apartment. The TV is off, and it is awkwardly silent. She's been wanting to tell him for a while now. He stands up and steps toward the kitchen.

"Wait! Sit down, I have to tell you something," Jeri says. Paul sits back down and looks into her eyes with confusion.

"I've decided to donate some eggs," she says. Jeri explains her decision for donating her eggs and mentions the money she could receive.

"So how much do you get?" Paul asks.

"$2,500."

"Holy crap!" Paul's eyes widen and a childish grin stretches across his face. But money is not the primary reason for Jeri—she really wants to help someone else in need. Jeri has several relatives that have had infertility troubles in the past, and she knows how hard it can be.

She is physically fit at this point in her life, there are no diseases that run in her family, and she is also smart and attractive. These characteristics, Jeri says, make her an ideal candidate for egg donation.

Besides monetary motivations, says Diane Clapp, medical information director for the National Infertility Association, young women like Jeri sometimes donate in the hopes their egg may help someone who is having trouble getting pregnant. The Iowa City clinic, Mayfield says, receives many letters from couples expressing their gratitude to egg donors, even when a pregnancy is not achieved.

Time and commitment are the largest obstacles donors face. Not to mention the detailed medical and psychological testing. Screening involves six weeks of in-depth psychological and medical exams. Detailed questions are asked about the medical history throughout the donor's family, as well as questions about personal sexual history. If an applicant passes all the tests, her eggs are deemed worthy of donation, and the results of her tests and all her personal information are entered into a catalogue the clinic provides to recipients. She then must wait for a recipient couple to choose her. Donors can sometimes wait a few weeks, sometimes a few years.

Recipient couples searching for egg donors consider the value of each egg based on the personal information. Physical features in a donor such as hair and eye color are important, as well as intelligence, ethnic background, talents, and interests.

When a donor is selected, retrieving the egg becomes just as complex as the screening process. First, the donor is injected with hormones, such as progesterone and estrogen, which stimulate the eggs. The hormone therapy lasts until the ovulation cycle of the donor is matched up with that of the recipient. After the donor's period, the donor injects daily shots of Depo-Provera for nine to eleven days. When the eggs mature, one final shot is injected. Two days later, the eggs are harvested.

The harvesting of the eggs involves a vaginal ultrasound-guided aspiration technique. The donor is given a sedative to alleviate discomfort. The aspiration process takes about 30 minutes.

There are some risks that donors need to be aware of, Mayfield says. Less than 1 percent of donors can suffer from severe hyperstimulation, a condition that can result in the loss of both ovaries. Most harvests go smoothly and without pain, just some bloating and enlarged ovaries.

Aimee, Alissa, and Jeri are still waiting to hear if their eggs are acceptable for donation, and the waiting adds only more anxiety. Aimee says she is concerned about many things surrounding her egg donation, but for her own sanity, she tries not to think too much about it. One thing seems to always creep into her mind: the fact that she will never know the child that is born from her egg.

"It's just a situation of give and take," she says. She has something that she can give to other people, and they have something that they can give her. She is also worried about what her family might say. She can hear her mom's voice inside her head, "Why would you need to do that?"

"I know how to disconnect from the situation. I know I'll still be OK about it later in my life," Aimee says.

Alissa has no plans to ever have children, and says she has no need for her eggs. The anonymous aspect of the donation process is something that helped her make the decision to donate. It is important for her to know that a child won't come knocking on her door asking her questions later in life.

Jeri says that having kids out in the world that are created with her genes is something she thinks about too. But as long as she's not using her eggs, she finds comfort knowing that someone else can.

"If someone else can use them, by all means, take them," she says. She also wishes to remain anonymous to the recipients and child. However, she did mark the box on her application that would allow the child created by her egg to read a message left by her on the application. It reads: "You are a gift from God and given to a family from a caring and loving donor, and I wish you the best of luck in your life. Be yourself, no matter what anyone says."