

## Should we be doing more to expose paternity fraud?

Thousands of men in the UK could be unwittingly raising children who are not their own. Should we be making more of an effort to expose 'paternal discrepancy', or is keeping quiet the best option, asks Gareth Rubin



'It's a piece of information that could destroy a family and it would only be shared if there was no choice' Photo: Alamy



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By Gareth Rubin

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It could be the ultimate fraud. Across Britain, thousands of men are likely to be raising children that they have been tricked into believing are theirs, when they were really fathered by another man. And now one victim of paternity fraud is calling for it to be made a criminal offence after he spent six years bringing up a boy he thought was his son, only to find out that his wife had used the sperm from her ex-boyfriend at an IVF clinic.

The man sued her for the £60,000 he had handed over in child maintenance after they split up, but only gained a small amount of compensation, even though the judge said he had been a victim of “clear deceit and fraud”.

It sounds like an extreme and isolated case. But studies suggest somewhere between two and 10 per cent of men have been fooled into raising another man’s child.

For obvious reasons, paternity fraud – or paternal discrepancy as healthcare professionals refer to it – is hard to track. The best British review was published in the journal *Epidemiol Community Health* ten years ago. Looking at all other good studies, it said the median average was a rate of four per cent. So one father in 25 is labouring under a serious misapprehension.

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*Paternal discrepancy is often discovered by accident – such as through medical tests for an illness which has a genetic element*

rates of infidelity are seen among pairs who are not married. Furthermore, time spent apart in marriages or long term relationships (for example, through occupational travel) is also associated with higher levels of infidelity.”

Paternal discrepancy is often discovered by accident – such as through organ donation or medical tests for an illness which has a genetic element. Sometimes a man has tried to father a second child and infertility testing shows that he couldn't have fathered the first.

Genetic counsellors are the professionals who advise on the results of tests for hereditary conditions, often after samples have been taken from foetuses in the womb as well as from the parents. Consequently they are often the first to know that the father isn't the father. A study in America found that more than 95 per cent of them would not tell a man that the child wasn't his. (Around 95 per cent of genetic counsellors are female, and you have to wonder if more men would be informed if more counsellors were male.)

And, of course, it's not just the father who suffers - the son or daughter can fare even worse if it is suddenly discovered that his or her father is, biologically, a stranger. A few years ago a young woman named Elspeth Chapman stumbled upon her mother's diary and discovered that she was the product of an illicit affair. “I was devastated. I couldn't believe it. My world began to fall apart after that,” she said. The resulting legal case, widely covered in the press, tore her family apart and ruined her relationship with the man who had brought her up.

Anna Middleton, a genetic counsellor working for the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute, said she had only informed one man that he was not the father of his children. She had had no option because he had been tested for infertility and there was no way around informing him. “That was absolutely devastating information for him. It had to be handled incredibly sensitively,” she says.

“It's something that is thought about very carefully. It's a piece of information that could destroy a family and it would only be shared if there was no choice, because it was directly relevant [to the medical condition being investigated].”

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paternity test, they can buy one from Boots.”

Informing a couple of non-paternity can usually be avoided by sticking very closely to the specific medical task the counsellor has been given, she explains: “If they have come for testing for a genetic condition, then that is what you focus on and you don't delve into any other interesting information that is gained from the tests. If they want a

Many admirable men knowingly bring up other men's children as their own without telling the child, because to do so would confuse and upset them. But for most men, the idea of doing so unwittingly wouldn't just be a theft of the love, effort and time that they put into the relationship, but would affect them on a primal level, almost as deeply as if their own children were to be taken from them.

We get the word “cuckold” from the cuckoo which lays its eggs in another bird's nest; and the cuckold has been an object of scorn and mockery for as long as he has been around. Yet given the apparent scale, and the devastating effect of paternity fraud, surely it's time to see such a man not as an object of ridicule, to be sniggered at behind his back, but as the victim of a cruel deception. After all, all it takes is one phone call for any father's world to be shattered in the same way.

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