

The new reform of the fertility laws allowing father e parenting has placed Natalie Gamble and her p children at the heart of a bitter national debate

NATALIE Gamble is in the garden of her detached cottage playing with her children, five-year-old daughter Frankie and Noah, aged two. As her son clambers onto the slide, Gamble keeps an eye on the toddler boy.

The setting could not be more idyllic. But there is one person missing — Frankie and Noah's father. The children are the offspring of a sperm donor and unlikely ever to discover the identity of their "daddy".

Natalie is Gamble. She may be mother to his children but the 35-year-old has never met the man who "fathered" her son and daughter. All she knows is the colour of his eyes and hair and that he likes music and keeping fit.

Increasing numbers of women like Gamble are resorting to donors in their determination to become mothers, man or no man. This has now been made easier by the Government which last week



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ditched rules requiring clinics to consider the need for a father when approving patients.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill does say a "second parent" is important but that single women and same sex couples should not be barred from IVF.

Typical advances in fertility treatment have created ethical dilemmas over whose rights are paramount — the parents, the donors or those of the children who have no choice in how they are conceived.

Gamble knows all about the hurdles of donor-assisted conception, and not just because of her own personal experience. As Britain's leading expert on Britain's fertility laws, the successful lawyer has counselled numerous clients. These

include single women having "DIY" pregnancies where they "hire" a male friend to father their child but do not want him involved in the upbringing.

And now Gamble, the Hampshire-born daughter of a teacher and an IBM executive, has been recruited by one of London's leading fertility clinics, the London Women's Clinic in Harley Street, to provide the country's first in-house legal service for patients. Officially launched tomorrow, this is especially aimed at women considering donor insemination.

Many potential parents, she says, are ignorant of the laws surrounding fertility treatment especially involving donated sperm or eggs. For example, the woman who carries a child is the legal mother, not the woman who has donated her eggs.

This is why Gamble, who is licensed by fertility regulator the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) to advise patients, has been brought in to help navigate through this maze.

"People need to understand their rights

— what works for them. Having gone through the process that I've gone through myself, I have first-hand knowledge of the pitfalls."

An associate with firm Lester Aldridge, Gamble studied history and modern politics at Southampton University before training as a lawyer. Articulate and assured, she is comfortable about her decision to opt for father free parenting.

She and her partner Lynn, 56, have been together since Gamble was a teenager and live in the village of Pocklington in Hampshire. Gamble always knew she wanted children but the couple spent five years discussing how they would select the father of their child.

How does she defend herself against critics who say lesbian couples or single women are selfish for not including a father in their decision to raise children?

"There has to be a right to say that — we do a very good job as parents. If you go to the lengths of using a donor and using a fertility clinic then you have given a lot of thought. It's great having small children — they are so much fun. As far as they're concerned, we are both 'mummy'."

So how did she go about choosing the father of her child? A sperm bank was an option but Gamble rejected this as too "mechanical". It would have meant ordering the sperm, then taking it home to inseminate herself. Instead, she trawled the internet contacting suitable clinics around the country. Natalie Gamble, then only 21, thought having a child with the help of fertility treatment would be straightforward. So the response from the clinics she contacted shocked her.

"The first thing I did was to phone up fer-



The lawyer who has never met her children's father

'Other children find it easy to accept that Frankie and Noah have no daddy'

tily watching the HFEA and ask them to send a list of fertility clinics. The clinic has to consider the needs of the child and many insisted on there being a father involved. I was quite horrified — to me this was discrimination."

Eventually she contacted the London Women's Clinic, which had no restrictions on same sex couples or single women and houses the country's largest sperm bank. Her choice of donor was based on physical characteristics Gamble was adamant her children should resemble both herself and her partner.

Having fertility treatment, Gamble says, was "stressful" and "emotionally distressing". Determined not to take any fertility-enhancing drugs, she went through four insemination attempts at the clinic.

"I wanted it all to be as natural as possible, I didn't want conception to be treated as a fertility problem. You have to drop everything to go through the treatment at the right time — it takes over your life."

Two weeks after the final attempt, a home pregnancy test confirmed Gamble was pregnant.

How did her family react to the fact that their grandchild was effectively fathered by a stranger they would never meet? Gamble describes her family background as "pretty liberal", so they were just "delighted" to learn they were to be grandparents for the first time. "We waited until Christmas Day when I was three months' pregnant to tell everyone. My mother was so excited she kept playing me with champagne — I had to remind her I shouldn't drink."

Just a few weeks before the birth in June 2002, she developed the potentially life-threatening condition pre-eclampsia, so doctors induced the pregnancy and Natalie gave birth to Frankie at Winchester hospital.

"The sense of euphoria lasted for months — I felt I was the first person in

the world to have done this." Getting pregnant for the second time was a lot more straightforward — the clinic used "alibino" sperm that had been frozen then thawed for her. This time, she took several months off work. Gamble now works four days a week while Lynn looks after the children full time.

The big question, though, is how would Gamble respond if her children asked to track down their father? Two years ago, the Government changed the law to allow children to trace their donors. Frankie and Noah were born before the lifting of anonymity, so do not have this option. But the time will come when they want to know more about their genetic heritage.

Though warm and approachable, there are times during the conversation when Gamble instead appears inscrutable and answers in legal language instead of talking about her own situation. For example, she says she has no objections to her children tracing their father but that "only a small proportion" of donor children want to know the identity of their donor parent.

"I feel disappointed that my own children won't be able to trace the donor but we know that at the time. We could have waited for the laws to change but there was no guarantee that would happen. My hope is that by being open, Frankie and Noah won't feel deprived of any information. We talk about how they were conceived all the time in front of the children so they know the truth. I've kept all the bits of paper

and also wrote a diary of what we went through trying to conceive. My feeling is the children probably won't want to take it further."

School has not been a problem. Gamble says other children seem to find it easy to accept that Frankie and Noah do not have a father as do other parents.

There was a day last year though when Frankie was playing on the beach with a group of little girls and Gamble over-

heard them asking about her "daddy".

"Frankie said: 'I've not got a dad.' One child kept asking, so Frankie told her she had two mummies. And the children just accepted this. Frankie knows she's special, she always has."

Does Gamble ever feel curious about the man who donated his sperm or wonder if her children share his features?

"I thought it would matter more, "on ice" in case she wants more. Before experiencing motherhood, she says she strongly believed that children's characters were a product of their surroundings, not their genes. Her view has now shifted.

"When I went into parenthood, I had a firm belief that children were created by nurture, not nature. But having now had children, that opinion has changed — they are both so different from each other. It will be interesting to see what characteristics come from me, from Lynn and from their donor."

CHILDREN born from sperm or egg donors after 2005 can track down their fathers or mothers once they reach 18. From the age of 16, they can also obtain basic details — such as hair colour — but nothing that can identify their biological parent.

A legal loophole still exists that allows men to keep their identity secret — if a man donates "fresh sperm" through unregistered online agencies, he can remain anonymous.

The donor: a man who donates sperm has no legal rights over any child that is