



Seeking Young Asian Females

If you're a young, educated Asian woman, you may be in high demand — not necessarily for your corporate skills or on dating sites, but for your eggs.

Laine* was 19 and in her second year of community college when an ad in her campus newspaper caught her eye. A Hawaiian fertility agency was seeking college women to donate their eggs to infertile couples or to act as surrogate mothers. Laine was curious; she hadn't heard of egg donation before, but the ad promised thousands of dollars to women who were willing and able to participate in their program, and she was feeling strapped for cash. She dialed the number listed to find out more, and soon she received a detailed packet in the mail explaining just how the process worked.

"Seeking Healthy, College-Educated Asian Women for Egg Donation" Pick up any college paper, and you're likely to find ads just like the one Laine saw that day. Private donor agencies, also known as egg brokers, offer thousands of dollars to female university students who are willing to donate their eggs to infertile couples. And because these agencies — which act as liaisons between hopeful parents and donors — are unregulated, there are few reliable statistics about the industry. Laws surrounding the practice still vary widely from state to state, and it's estimated that more than 10,000 babies are born in America each year through this process, and that the industry takes in about \$38 million annually. Increasingly, Asian and Latina college women are being sought out by such brokers. Laine, who is of 100 percent Japanese descent, belongs to the ethnic group in highest demand by donor clinics today.

"Certain ethnic groups are in high demand because there's a relatively small donor group. Like Asian groups — it's hard to find donors," says Steve Masler, the CEO of national matching company The Donor Source. Debora Spar, a Harvard professor and the author of *The Baby Business: How Money, Science, and Politics Drive the Commerce of Conception*, says the trend makes sense. "There is a price premium paid for Hispanic donors, Jewish donors and Asian donors. For the same reason that white couples have always preferred to adopt white babies, it turns out [Hispanic, Jewish and Asian couples] are no less prejudicial than anyone else," she says. "These populations have also historically been less willing to donate." So when you combine the fact that couples looking for a prospective donor typically seek someone from their own ethnic background, with the increasing numbers of Asian couples looking for a donor from a relatively small donor pool, you have a formula for high prices.

Culture and Commerce

Regina Joyner, who is of Chinese descent, and her husband Dennis began looking for an egg donor a few years ago. The Fredericksburg, Va., couple worked with two fertility clinics and also posted an ad on a donor and surrogacy web board to find potential candidates. Regina felt it was important to find an Asian donor — preferably Chinese — so the child would resemble her and their daughter, now 5. She was also concerned about keeping their search private because of her family's traditional Chinese beliefs. "The baby would have to look like my daughter," says Regina. "My mom would never know. She is very old school. She didn't come to the United States until she was in her early 30s. She was already brought up with their culture."

Dr. Min Zhou, the founding chair of UCLA's Department of Asian American Studies, says that because some Asian cultures believe continuing the bloodline of a family is so important, ovum donation might be looked down upon or rejected in more traditional communities. She does concede that egg donation might be preferential because at least some genetic material is being passed on, and acknowledges that such prejudices may decrease as Asian Americans become more assimilated. Cecilia and Frank,* a California couple, had similar concerns when they began their search for an egg donor. Cecilia, who is Filipina, wanted to use another Filipina woman's embryos. "My family has

a conservative Catholic, old-world view of life," Cecilia says. "When I brought up egg donation, my parents were quite horrified. Bloodlines are important to them, so I know that if we ever pursued egg donation, we would not be able to reveal this to them." Another problem that both couples faced were the high fees that many prospective donors requested. Reported prices offered for ovum donation can range from \$3,000 to a staggering \$100,000, though the average price is about \$5,000. Some couples are willing to pay top dollar for Ivy League-educated women, donors who match their ethnicity and religion, or students with unique talents.

Cecilia says that many prospective Asian donors that she and her husband located were asking for exorbitant fees. "That disturbed me. To me, that shows an element of greed," Cecilia wrote in a recent email. "No doubt egg donors do this for money and they should be compensated ... but when they add an extra \$5,000 to \$10,000 for being Filipina? That was hard to stomach."

Regina says she and her husband were willing to pay \$3,000 to \$5,000 for a donor, but some responses they received to their online post seeking Asian donors asked for as much as \$10,000. "It made me feel uncomfortable," she adds.

Organizations like the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) raise their own ethical questions about such inflated fees. The ASRM warns that young women may not think through the ramifications of donating their eggs, especially when faced with the possibility of a huge — sometimes life-changing — paycheck. In a recent report, the ASRM concluded that "the higher the payment, the greater the possibility that women will discount risks." For Laine, the decision was one she didn't take lightly. "I didn't make a decision for the first three months. I wanted to make sure my motives weren't just making money. I think that would be wrong," she says. After spending that time researching the procedure, praying and discussing her choice with friends and family, she felt she could make the right decision. "The deciding factor for me was the thought that I would try an egg donor if I ever found out that I couldn't bear my own children," she says.

Her Japanese background was also a key element. "It's part of the Japanese culture to pursue your career first, find the husband, find the house, and then have kids," she explains. "I thought, 'I'm not going to have kids right now,' and [biologically], it's difficult for Japanese women to reproduce later on, but that's when they're financially stable." Laine adds that some of her own family members had some difficulty bearing children, so she felt good about her decision to help other women by donating. Still, Laine's thorough research and informed choice may not be the norm, according to The New York State Task Force on Life and the Law, an advisory group on assisted reproductive technologies comprised of experts on health, law, medicine, religion, psychology and ethics. The task force undertook a study on egg donation in the late '90s, and they concluded that most women were not adequately informed about the process when they agreed to become donors.

The Process

For Laine, the first step to becoming a donor was a lengthy questionnaire, which asked about everything from her hobbies to her medical history to her weight and height. Then, she had a full physical, including a blood test to screen her hormone levels and ensure that she was free of infectious diseases like hepatitis and HIV. Laine also met with a psychologist, who determined that she was emotionally and mentally capable of going through the process. Her profile was then added to the agency's database, which couples can search to choose the egg donor they think is the best fit. Laine was told that she'd be contacted if and when a couple was interested in using her eggs.

She didn't have to wait long. It was only about a month later when a couple decided they'd like Laine to be their egg donor. Laine believes a big reason she was chosen so quickly is her ethnicity. "Because I live in Hawaii and there's a lot of Asians, I got a call maybe a month after. The agency told me that I would be getting a lot [of money] because I'm full Japanese and my age and my health are good," she says. She was excited, if a little nervous, and started the treatments to ready her eggs for collection.

Egg donation is a three to four week process. It can be time consuming, and women who are donating can't drink, use drugs or smoke during the cycle. They also are instructed to abstain from sex, because they could become pregnant themselves. Donors are monitored through each step, and regular visits to the doctor, blood tests and ultrasounds are required to monitor the

effectiveness of the medications and to make sure that the donor is following the rules. The process begins with birth control pills and daily injections of a medicine to stop the ovaries from functioning normally for one or more weeks. This is to sync up the hopeful mother and the donor's cycles, so that when the eggs are retrieved, the intended mother is ready for the fertilized egg to be implanted. This treatment can cause side effects like breast tenderness, moodiness, headaches and sleeplessness.

Then higher-than-normal egg production is stimulated by another injectable drug, taken for about 10 days. This medicine can cause many of the same side effects as the first drug, and can also lead to fluid retention and enlarged ovaries. "There is this thing where you sit up or sneeze too suddenly, your ovaries hurt, because they're bigger than they usually are," says Laine. "You can't jump around."

Before the eggs are to be retrieved, a final injection readies them for release. The actual egg collection is a short, outpatient surgery. The donor goes under anesthesia, and a needle is inserted through the vagina and into each ovary to remove the eggs. Light bleeding and bloating are common afterward, and doctors recommend that patients take the rest of the day off from school or work.

There are potential complications and side effects. Dr. Lawrence Werlin, who works with The Donor Source's egg donors, says the most serious risk is ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS). This condition can occur before or after egg retrieval, resulting in swollen ovaries, bloating, a buildup of fluid and the risk of hospitalization. In the most severe cases, one or both ovaries must be removed. "Although when doing this process, we are doing a controlled ovarian hyperstimulation, the line between control and out of control can be quite thin," Dr. Werlin wrote in a recent email. Laine remembers being instructed to drink lots of Gatorade and fluids to lessen her risk of the condition. While severe cases of OHSS occur in less than 2 percent of patients, more common side effects from the hormones and medications include nausea, vomiting, bloating, weight gain, abdominal discomfort and mood swings. The best way for donors to protect themselves, says Dr. Werlin, is to be certain that the agency they're working with adheres to FDA and ASRM guidelines.

The Aftermath

Not all donations will lead to a successful pregnancy, but donors are compensated either way. Agencies are compensating women for their time and medical procedures, not the actual eggs. And while many agencies tell young women that donation doesn't have long-term health risks, egg donation is a relatively new technology and there have been few studies done on the lifelong effects of the procedure.

Regina and Dennis have given up on finding a suitable egg donor. After weeding through lots of what they called "weird" responses to their online ad and joining waiting lists for Asian ovum donors at matching clinics, they've decided to adopt a baby from China instead. "I'm just not going to go through this anymore," says Regina. Cecilia and Frank were also ready to move on to adoption, until the chance to pursue a cycle with the eggs from a woman of a similar background came up recently. Reflecting on their experience seeking out an egg donor, Cecilia says "I find it wonderful that [infertile] couples have a chance to become parents through [donor eggs], but I find it sad that it is all part of a money-making business and comes at such a high price for suffering, infertile people." As for Laine, she's now 22 and has graduated from college. She is working in marketing and sales and has recommended ovum donation to some of her girlfriends, a few of whom have gone through the process and have had positive experiences. Still, she says, "the worst aspect is other people's misconceptions about egg donation leading to negative perceptions of me." Because of this stigma, Laine didn't want to reveal her full name for this story. Laine has donated four times now — the ASRM discourages women from donating more than six times in their lives — and was elated when she recently found out that the first couple who used her eggs gave birth to twins. "I am impacting someone's life in a very positive way," she says. Still, she warns that egg donation isn't for everyone. "As a college student, [the money] can be tempting, but you really need to take it seriously and understand that this is somebody's life."

**Names have been changed to protect privacy.*