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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	AOB for the meeting of EPSCO (Health) of 20 June 2025: International limits on the number of children per sperm or egg donor - Information from Sweden, supported by Belgium, Finland, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain

The four Nordic National Ethics Councils recommend establishing an international limit on the number of children that can be conceived from a single egg or sperm donor. The cross-border use of gametes needs to be addressed through agreement at the European level. The Councils urge the Nordic countries to collaborate on a policy initiative to put this discussion on the agenda in the European Union and the Council of Europe.

The increasing cross-border use of gametes in assisted reproduction in Europe raises several ethical and regulatory concerns, including issues such as the commodification of procreation, the status and rights of donors and donor-conceived individuals and fertility tourism. One particularly pressing issue is the absence of international limits on the number of children a donor can be the progenitor of across borders.

The Swedish National Council on Medical Ethics, the Danish Council on Ethics, the Finnish National Advisory Board on Social Welfare and Health Care Ethics and the Norwegian Biotechnology Advisory Board, address this in a joint statement.

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant rise in the number of children born with the help of sperm and egg donation in Europe. This increase is largely attributed to legislative changes in many countries, which have expanded access to assisted reproduction to include same-sex female couples and single women, alongside opposite-sex couples. Another contributing factor is an overall decline in fertility and the trend of starting families later in life. Several European countries have faced challenges in recruiting enough donors domestically to meet the growing demand for gametes, prompting reliance on commercial cryobanks that export gametes internationally. Denmark has some of the world's largest cryobanks; they offer global services and recruit donors internationally. Private cryobanks have also emerged in other European countries. For example, the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE) have found that around 50% of all European egg donation treatments are performed in Spain. It is estimated that most of the recipients of donor eggs are patients traveling from other countries. International commercial cryobanks provide a significant proportion of gametes used in assisted reproduction in many European countries. While the exact number of involuntarily childless individuals assisted by private cryobanks across Europe remains unknown, one of the leading Danish cryobanks estimates that it has helped create over 85,000 children.

While many European countries have national regulations limiting the number of offspring per donor, no international regulations currently exist to regulate the number of children a donor can be the progenitor of across borders. Some commercial cryobanks have self-imposed voluntary limits, such as a maximum of 75 families per donor, while others have no limits. As a result, donor-conceived individuals may end up with more than 100 genetic half-siblings across the world.

Historically, national limits on the number of children per donor have been primarily driven by concerns about the transmission of hereditary diseases and the risk of consanguinity (inbreeding). However, technological development and recent social trends have led many donor-conceived individuals to use direct-to-consumer genetic testing and social media to connect with their donor and genetic half-siblings, often uncovering a large and previously unknown number of siblings worldwide. This raises new concerns about the potential psychosocial impact on donor-conceived individuals and donors. There is a distinction between having half-siblings across six families versus 75, or having 12 versus 100 offspring seeking contact over the course of a donor's lifetime.

The four National Ethics Councils recognise that international regulation limiting the number of children per donor could reduce the availability of gametes and increase the cost of assisted reproduction, making regulation a complex issue with conflicting stakeholder interests. However, uncertainty about the long-term impact of current practices — especially considering psychosocial and ethical concerns — highlights the need for international policies and greater transparency. With Europe’s evolving family structures and declining fertility, the demand for egg and sperm donation is likely to increase, leading to greater reliance on international gamete exchange due to a shortage of donors domestically. In the light of these considerations, the four National Ethics Councils conclude that establishing cross-border limits on the number of donor offspring would benefit donor-conceived individuals, donors, and their families.

We therefore call for:

- Highlighting at EU level the issue of the cross-border use of gametes and how the problems arising from this can be addressed.