

What's Sperm Worth

It's an issue so emotional that it provokes some people to anger: "Human tissue should be given, not sold." "Commercial trade in tissue is wrong!" In America these issues may only be topical social banter, but elsewhere they have major consequences for the future of reproductive medical services.

Regardless of whether gametes (sperm; oocytes) are property and therefore subject to sale, no one really wants to buy semen. It is a material that men commonly "trash." Globally, a majority of men are "altruistic" semen donors, cheerfully giving to almost any woman who wants it. Until proven otherwise, any semen sample must prudently be considered a biohazard, a vector for communicable disease. Semen attains clinical value only when it and its donor have been professionally evaluated. People who argue for altruistic donation perhaps confuse economic worth and symbolic value. Gametes, insemination and fertilization and pregnancy take on personal significance beyond their clinical significance, much as a wedding ring or a house may have significance beyond material value. Symbolic attribution – to whatever degree – is usually recognized as occurring outside the purview of the material provider and is unrelated to compensation for its economic growth.

It is commonly known that men who provide semen for clinical use receive modest remuneration, payment for providing semen at a certain time and at a place not of their own choosing. More than that, these men must complete lengthy questionnaires, research their family medical history, endure physical examinations, including needle sticks and even adopt a lifestyle consistent with clinical requirements. This is an ongoing, time-consuming process not at all similar to blood donation. It is as reasonable to compensate the donor for his effort as it is to compensate a member of the clergy for taking time to marry a couple. Furthermore, sperm donors agree to repeat this process several times a week, providing semen on demand. It is for this service that they receive remuneration rather than for the semen that might otherwise be wasted.

In considering the economic worth of fresh human sperm spontaneously donated, it's not much. The worth of semen suitable for clinical use is considerable. Part of that value is the professional evaluation and documentation of it and its donor. Another part is its processing. And the contribution of the semen donor is substantive and deserving of acknowledgement.

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