

A happy guinea pig for open adoption

August 16, 2009 • 09:13am



It is the curious thought that strikes most adolescents at some point. What a fluke to find myself born and alive.

Mum and dad. A different day, a different mood and, well, a different tale. You have to be grateful for the haphazard chain of events that means you even exist in this world.

Hannah Duckmanton, 22, a newly trained primary school teacher, says she feels it more than most. Not hard when by another fluke you end up living streets from the clinic where you were once so nearly aborted.

The story goes that her biological mother had a final meeting with her biological father in Hamilton, then stopped off at Taradale in Napier on the drive back to Blenheim. "She had an abortion booked, went to the appointment and everything, and just found she couldn't do it," Ms Duckmanton says.

But what were the other options? Her mother was already struggling with bringing up one child on her own. Adoption? What mother could bring herself to give her baby away? Abortion remained the obvious choice. However, recent law changes meant New Zealand was pioneering a new way of adopting open rather than closed. Adoption with parental contact.

A Christchurch couple came forward who frankly "would have agreed to anything" to have a child. So on a frosty morning in July 1986, Ms Duckmanton dropped into the world the birth took just 15 minutes and became a test case for the open-adoption philosophy.

Adoption has become a rare thing. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, New Zealand had one of the highest adoption rates in the world. It reflected the morality of the times. Such was the stigma that an unwed woman would simply be expected to hush up her pregnancy and give up her child.

A peak was hit in 1968 when more than 2600 children were placed in adoptive care. By the 1970s, there was probably an adopted child in every classroom. Although, with the adoptions being closed no contact with the biological parents, all information sealed in files held by the Social Welfare Department many were none the wiser.

It was thought a clean break would leave no scars. Adopted children were even issued with false birth certificates. It was all arranged to make it seem as though the child had been born to different parents.

But, of course, many grew up feeling something was amiss. No matter how loving the home, the lack of a genetic connection of those subtle physical similarities and even likenesses of mannerism would have been noticed. And when the truth emerged, at a parent's funeral or other bombshell occasion, a life would turn out to have been a lie.

Closed adoptions were psychologically damaging for birth parents too. The guilt, the what-ifs.

In the late 1970s, adoption rates plunged. Social attitudes presented other choices. Doctors were allowed to prescribe unmarried women the Pill. The Domestic Purposes Benefit made it financially possible for single mothers to keep children. Abortion became legal in 1977.

In 1985, the Adult Adoption Information Act ended the era of closed adoptions. At 20, adoptees had the right to a copy of their real birth certificate. Biological parents were allowed to track down lost children.

Overnight, the old secrecy was gone. New Zealand was going to shift to an open system where adoption was a living, continuing, process. With knowledge and contact, adopted children could grow up more secure in who they were.

But open adoption never really took off. A flood of bad publicity, as some of

the heart-breaking stories of the closed era could at last be told, made people feel that adoption did not really work. Officially, placing children with whanau, extended family, became the preferred option if mothers could not be persuaded to give mothering a go themselves. Adoption by strangers came right down the list of choices.

So non-family adoption numbers fell off the chart. By 1990, there were barely 200 nationwide. By 2000, less than 100. And last year, 77.

Childless couples turned to babies in foreign orphanages Russia in particular, and more recently China. But treaties led to a tightening up and such adoptions have almost died out.

Ms Duckmanton is in Christchurch on a flying visit to her adoptive mother, Louise Walton. They want to tell their story because they know the idea of an open adoption throws up so many questions.

Ms Walton says hers was a typical tale of a childless marriage. In those days, there were no fertility treatments available. After six years of pining, she put her name in the pool as a prospective adoptive parent.

After references and cross-checks, a family profile was drawn up. What kind of home could they offer? With so few children available, and so many couples in competition, there was a nervous wait. But after eight months, "I was rung at work to say we had been shortlisted. The birth mother was in Blenheim and she wanted to meet us. So we drove up and were taken into a little room where this very pregnant lady came in. And I cried. And cried. For a long time", Ms Walton says.

Luckily, there seemed to be an instant rapport with Hannah's mother, Debbie Karaka. "Once I stopped crying, we talked and talked. There was an amazing connection."

Ms Walton, of course, had not been sure what to expect. You have your

stereotypes. So she had half-expected to meet a confused teenager or a hopeless drug addict. But as is true in most adoption cases, Ms Karaka was a mother making a difficult but rational decision.

At 24, alone and caring for a four-year-old already, it was just a better choice for her baby to go to another home. But in a way she would not be completely lost.

So a few weeks later, Hannah was born. And then it got emotional.

Under the law, Ms Karaka had 11 days to reconsider her decision, so Ms Walton felt she was treading on eggshells. There might be a last-minute change of heart.

There was some confusion at the hospital when she and her husband were ushered out of the ward soon after arriving for the first visit. No-one quite knew the proper protocol. Should they be allowed to hold a child not yet officially theirs? "Debbie saw us leaving after 15 minutes and thought, 'Oh no, they don't like my baby!'," says Ms Walton.

However, the hospital rallied, the confusion was sorted. And a couple of weeks later, they signed the papers to make it legal.

One of the surprises for Ms Walton was a relative lack of red tape. Adoption overseas can still be highly regulated but in New Zealand there is a more of a DIY feel to it.

It was largely up to Ms Walton and Ms Karaka to negotiate how open it would be. The social workers could suggest guidelines but it was clear that flexibility and understanding were called for.

Ms Walton says this is one of the great advantages of an open adoption. Decisions are not locked in at an early stage. There is room for relationships to grow.

An obvious concern is that there seems to be the risk of becoming entangled in the life of the birth mother too.

But Ms Walton says while they became close to Ms Karaka an extended family relationship did develop, something like in-laws or cousins there was no crossing of the line. And again, this is what has been generally reported from open adoptions. There is the family-style mutual support, but also boundaries tend to be respected.

Hannah says she grew up knowing she had two kinds of mummy. Her "tummy mummy" was kept up to date with letters and photos. When she was eight and Ms Karaka had married and had more children Ms Duckmanton started to spend holidays with the other side of her family. There were no years of wondering what her real mother might be like, why she might have been abandoned, whether they would get on. "I'd felt like an only child, so I was just excited about having sisters pretty much. I didn't really think too much about the mum thing."

Ms Duckmanton did get a sense of what a closed adoption would have been like from the curiosity she felt about her biological father. That had been a failed relationship and her birth mother "did not want to go there".

"So I'd had all these thoughts. Like maybe he's a millionaire."

There was a nagging identity issue too. Ms Karaka was Pakeha, but Ms Duckmanton clearly had some ethnic heritage. Friends reckoned she must be part-Maori. At university she plucked up the nerve to track her father down through her birth certificate.

He turned out to be part-Aborigine. "What are the odds of that in New Zealand?"

She was glad to have the last piece of the jigsaw clicked into place. They are not close but she is in contact with another nine half-siblings.

Ms Duckmanton is passionate about open adoption being better known. She shows a fresh tattoo on the inside of her left wrist (while mother Ms Walton shakes a weary head).

It spells arohanui, Maori for "big love". Ms Duckmanton says that means her with her two families. "Look, there I am in the middle the `han' in the arohanui."