

# WHO'S YOUR DADDY?

Greg Callaghan examines the plight of men who receive the heartbreaking news that the children they have raised are not biologically theirs.

In the thick golden light of a country sunset, Nigel Brown sat hunched on his front doorstep, sobbing uncontrollably. Glancing back with bloodshot eyes at his four children, aged 6 to 13, running amok inside, he was hit by the sudden, somewhat surreal recognition that life as he had known it was over. "It was like a punch in the stomach, the shock of accepting my children weren't really mine at all."

A neighbour, worried by Brown's fragile emotional state, called his mother, who promptly picked up the children and dropped them home to his ex-wife, who lives on a property in the green, rolling hills outside this Victorian town.

That was 18 months ago, and the handsome, slow-talking 36-year-old hasn't seen his kids since. His personal descent began the night three years ago when his wife of 12 years told him she'd met someone else and their marriage was over; but it was only after learning the truth about his children that the sense of betrayal began to gnaw at his soul. Doubts about his youngest, his only daughter (she was conceived after I'd had a vasectomy, but my ex-wife blamed the doctor for stuffing up the operation), had long niggled him. But it was his spirited mother, Linda, who, shortly after the marriage split, ordered a paternity testing kit through DNA Solutions in Melbourne.

"It was like a punch in the stomach," Nigel Brown (left) says of DNA tests that revealed only one of his four children was biologically his.

Linda found it easier than brushing her infant grand-daughter's teeth. After receiving the kit in the mail, she took a swab of saliva from the little girl's mouth and packed it into a sterile envelope, along with one already collected from son Nigel. For good measure she added a lock of hair and a few nail clippings.

Six weeks later, at a cost of \$600, no questions asked, the results landed back in her letterbox, excluding Brown as the father.

That terrible thunderclap was followed by another, just six weeks later, when Linda, overwhelmed with foreboding, took samples from Brown's youngest son, George.

The torment of a second negative result drove Brown to order a DNA kit himself, this time to test his second-eldest boy, Tom. ("No worries, Dad," his son told him, handing him a few plucked hairs.) Fearing the worst from these results, Linda organised for the family doctor to open the envelope. Just as well: another heartbreaking negative.

Having got wind of the tests, Brown's ex-wife shaved all her sons' heads and sent a threatening note via her solicitor. Subsequent legal counter-threats from Brown's solicitor, however, convinced her to agree to a full round of paternity tests for all four children (the Family Court only recognises DNA tests undertaken with the consent of the mother, using blood samples analysed by an accredited laboratory). The result? Only Brown's eldest son was his.

"How could it have come to this?" he asks with a hollow laugh. "I don't understand how a mother could do this to her marriage, to her children. I feel heartbroken for all four of them."

It is, of course, a deceit that dupes not just one dad but two, and after one of Brown's best mates – named by his ex-wife as the possible father – was tested and ruled out, it's now believed the father is in fact a middle-aged businessman, with four children of his own, living in the same town. This man, if pursued



Although David Norman (left) proved he is the biological father of Manny, 5, Manuel Masu retained custody of her.

through the courts, may now be liable to pay child support for the children Nigel Brown thought were his.

EVERY DAY IN AUSTRALIA, AT LEAST TEN MEN will open their mail to find the potentially explosive results of a DNA paternity test. Between two and three will receive the unhappy news that they are not the biological father of their child. For the first time in human history, science is able to determine with almost foolproof accuracy (greater than 99.99 per cent) whether someone is the father of a child. While the blood tests of old could rule out paternity if a man had a different

blood group from his offspring, they couldn't definitively confirm it even if the blood groups matched, always leaving room for doubt.

That doubt has plagued men for millennia, fueling the classic literary themes of infidelity, sexual jealousy, betrayal and revenge. From Shakespeare to the present, the man tricked ("cuckolded") into raising another's child has been the butt of social ridicule. Evolutionary psychologists say the need for "paternity certainty" has propelled men's historical drive to control female sexuality and so reduce the risk of infidelity – from restricting their physical movement (foot-binding in China) to exercising sexual desire (circumcision in Africa)

and reducing their erotic appeal to other males (the head-to-toe bumps of fundamentalist Islam). It explains, they argue, the traditional male preference for virgin brides.

Public morals campaigners, meanwhile, point to the soaring number of paternity tests – more than 5000 annually in Australia alone – as yet another indication of the breakdown of the traditional family into a melting pot of step-siblings and step-parents. But it's more likely that the DNA test's ability to pin down paternity has simply lifted the lid on the age-old problem of infidelity.

The American Association of Blood Banks estimates up to one in ten people in the US has a different biological father to the one believed to be, and best guesstimates in Australia put it at a minimum one in 20. The Australian Medical Association claims there are conservatively 200,000 families where "the presumptive father is not the biological father". In the past, when dad and kids thought they knew who they were, cradle-to-grave family secrets could be concealed for generations. Not any more.

The biological certainty introduced by DNA testing is rewriting the laws on fatherhood. The Australian Law Reform Commission recently proposed that DNA tests performed without the consent of the mother be outlawed, and fathers like Nigel Brown who outlawed them subject to criminal proceedings – a prospect that engages the men's rights lobby.

On November 29, the Victorian Supreme Court will consider an appeal against Melbourne man Liam Magill, who in the first case of paternity fraud in Australia was awarded