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Men, Who Needs Them?

By GREG HAMPIKIAN

Boise, Idaho

MAMMALS are named after their defining characteristic, the glands capable of sustaining a life for years after birth — glands that are functional only in the female. And yet while the term “mammal” is based on an objective analysis of shared traits, the genus name for human beings, *Homo*, reflects an 18th-century masculine bias in science.

That bias, however, is becoming harder to sustain, as men become less relevant to both reproduction and parenting. Women aren’t just becoming men’s equals. It’s increasingly clear that “mankind” itself is a gross misnomer: an uninterrupted, intimate and essential maternal connection defines our species.

The central behaviors of mammals revolve around how we bear and raise our young, and humans are the parenting champions of the class. In the United States, for nearly 20 percent of our life span we are considered the legal responsibility of our parents.

With expanding reproductive choices, we can expect to see more women choose to reproduce without men entirely. Fortunately, the data for children raised by only females is encouraging. As the Princeton sociologist Sara S. McLanahan has shown, poverty is what hurts children, not the number or gender of parents.

That’s good, since women are both necessary and sufficient for reproduction, and men are neither. From the production of the first cell (egg) to the development of the fetus and the birth and breast-feeding of the child, fathers can be absent. They can be at work, at home, in prison or at war, living or dead.

Think about your own history. Your life as an egg actually started in your mother’s developing ovary, before she was born; you were wrapped in your mother’s fetal body as it developed within your grandmother.

After the two of you left Grandma’s womb, you enjoyed the protection of your mother’s

prepubescent ovary. Then, sometime between 12 and 50 years after the two of you left your grandmother, you burst forth and were sucked by her fimbriae into the fallopian tube. You glided along the oviduct, surviving happily on the stored nutrients and genetic messages that Mom packed for you.

Then, at some point, your father spent a few minutes close by, but then left. A little while later, you encountered some very odd tiny cells that he had shed. They did not merge with you, or give you any cell membranes or nutrients — just an infinitesimally small packet of DNA, less than one-millionth of your mass.

Over the next nine months, you stole minerals from your mother's bones and oxygen from her blood, and you received all your nutrition, energy and immune protection from her. By the time you were born your mother had contributed six to eight pounds of your weight. Then as a parting gift, she swathed you in billions of bacteria from her birth canal and groin that continue to protect your skin, digestive system and general health. In contrast, your father's 3.3 picograms of DNA comes out to less than one pound of male contribution since the beginning of Homo sapiens 107 billion babies ago.

And while birth seems like a separation, for us mammals it's just a new form of attachment to our female parent. If your mother breast-fed you, as our species has done for nearly our entire existence, then you suckled from her all your water, protein, sugar, fats and even immune protection. She sampled your diseases by holding you close and kissing you, just as your father might have done; but unlike your father, she responded to your infections by making antibodies that she passed to you in breast milk.

I don't dismiss the years I put in as a doting father, or my year at home as a house husband with two young kids. And I credit my own father as the more influential parent in my life. Fathers are of great benefit. But that is a far cry from "necessary and sufficient" for reproduction.

If a woman wants to have a baby without a man, she just needs to secure sperm (fresh or frozen) from a donor (living or dead). The only technology the self-impregnating woman needs is a straw or turkey baster, and the basic technique hasn't changed much since Talmudic scholars debated the religious implications of insemination without sex in the fifth century. If all the men on earth died tonight, the species could continue on frozen sperm. If the women disappear, it's extinction.

Ultimately the question is, does "mankind" really need men? With human cloning

technology just around the corner and enough frozen sperm in the world to already populate many generations, perhaps we should perform a cost-benefit analysis.

It's true that men have traditionally been the breadwinners. But **women have been a majority of college graduates since the 1980s**, and their numbers are growing. It's also true that men have, on average, a bit more muscle mass than women. But in the age of ubiquitous weapons, the one with the better firepower (and knowledge of the law) triumphs.

Meanwhile women live longer, are healthier and are far less likely to commit a violent offense. If men were cars, who would buy the model that doesn't last as long, is given to lethal incidents and ends up impounded more often?

Recently, the geneticist J. Craig Venter showed that the entire genetic material of an organism can be synthesized by a machine and then put into what he called an "artificial cell." This was actually a bit of press-release hyperbole: Mr. Venter started with a fully functional cell, then swapped out its DNA. In doing so, he unwittingly demonstrated that the female component of sexual reproduction, the egg cell, cannot be manufactured, but the male can.

When I explained this to a female colleague and asked her if she thought that there was yet anything irreplaceable about men, she answered, "They're entertaining."

Gentlemen, let's hope that's enough.

Greg Hampikian is a professor of biology and criminal justice at Boise State University and the director of the Idaho Innocence Project.