Title: Psychosocial Aspects of Ultrasound Examinations during Pregnancy

Agency: Centre for Technology Assessment at the Swiss Science and Technology Council, Birkenweg 61, 3003 Bern, Switzerland; tel: +41 31 322 9963, fax: +41 31 323 3659, ta@swtr.admin.ch, www.ta-swiss.ch.

The study was carried out by the research groups of Professor Claus Buddeberg and Professor Renate Huch at the University of Zurich Hospital.


Aim: In Switzerland, two ultrasound examinations are usually performed during a pregnancy. Both of these examinations are covered under the National Health Care Insurance Plan, but a revision of the Health Care Insurance Law with a view to reduce costs has brought this coverage into question. It was against this background that the Swiss Federal Office for Social Insurance and the Centre for Technology Assessment decided to evaluate the psychological effects of ultrasound examinations and the attitude of expecting parents towards them. This study provides information which can serve as a basis for deciding if these prenatal examinations should remain a definite part of health insurance coverage.

Conclusions and results:
- The technical aspects of ultrasound testing receive good grades and the prevailing assessment of ultrasound examinations for prenatal diagnosis is positive. Most of the women and men questioned believe that this technique should be an integral part of the medical care for expecting women.
- But some of those questioned believed that the information they had received concerning the ultrasound examination had not been comprehensive, and some would have liked to have had more understandable explanations and more time for discussions.
- Many women mentioned the fear which a discovered disorder could possibly awaken in the parents. A few patients who were affected by positive findings were additionally burdened by the fact that they felt left alone at a time when important decisions concerning the future of the pregnancy needed to be made.
- Approximately 30% of the women surveyed stated that they hadn’t realized at the time of the first ultrasound examination that a suspicious diagnostic finding could force them into a decision-making crisis concerning the termination of pregnancy.

Recommendations:
- The conditions for more comprehensive and detailed counseling should be improved. It is of great importance that sufficient time be provided for discussions in order to allow the parents to come to terms with the information they have been confronted with.
- Counselling discussions are to be open, without placing the parents under pressure, and the doctors’ basic approach is to be supportive and understanding.
- Guidelines for the correct means of caring for women who are confronted with a possible malformation of their unborn child should be developed. It is also necessary to work out concepts for cooperation between doctors, nurses, chaplains, social services, and psychologists.

Methods: In this study, parents who came to the Ultrasound Center at the University of Zurich Hospital due to a suspected disorder of their unborn child were questioned. 128 women took part in the study. In order to learn more about how the psychological state of the affected women developed over time, they (and sometimes their partners) were questioned on three different occasions. The first questioning session was in the form of an oral interview which took place shortly before an elucidating ultrasound examination, i.e., before suspected disorders had been confirmed or refuted. In addition to the interview, the participants also completed written question forms. The second session, a telephone interview which was also complemented with a written questionnaire, was held approximately 12 days later, a point in time when the parents knew whether their suspicions had been confirmed or dispelled. In the third phase of the study, the participants were mailed a question form which was to be filled out by hand; this questionnaire was sent approximately 4 weeks after either the birth of the child or an eventual termination of the pregnancy.

Written by Dr. Adrian Rüegsegger, SWISS TA, Switzerland