

PRE-BIRTH SCREENING Something Wrong with Baby?

(Adapted from an article by Life International)

Every pregnant woman is nowadays encouraged, as a matter of routine, to have pre-natal diagnostic tests. When these are done to protect the pregnancy and for the welfare of the unborn child, such procedures are obviously welcome. But in the great majority of cases the real reason is to check for any abnormality of the child and to offer abortion as quickly as possible.

If the child is thought to be disabled the pressures on the mother to have an abortion will often be very great. In some hospitals, women will have been required to agree to abortion in advance – if the tests prove positive. In many places, women are not told clearly what the tests are for and parents are unprepared for the shock of learning that there is something wrong and being given only a day or so to decide for or against abortion.

Few hospitals provide any real counselling to help parents cope with the disappointment and heartbreak. They will be hassled into agreeing to a 'termination'.

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Parents are rarely told that:

- (a) pre-natal testing can be seriously inaccurate. It can produce false positives and false negatives. So perfectly healthy children are needlessly killed; many disabled ones are not 'spotted';
- (b) pre-natal testing can cause miscarriage and damage the child seriously;
- (c) pre-natal testing may discover a disability that the child will eventually suffer. So, for instance, the spina bifida detected in the womb may turn out to be a minor abnormality after birth;
- (d) the law states that eugenic abortion is unlawful unless there is *substantial* risk of *serious* abnormality of the child.

What's wrong with eugenic abortion?

First of all, abortion is never easy to handle. LIFE has extensive experience of the effects on women of abortion and knows that even when abortion seemed to be in the best interests of everyone, the subsequent grief, guilt, alienation and loss of self-esteem can cause long-term trauma to both parents.

In the case of eugenic abortion, the trauma may be even more intense because the child would usually have been wanted and the bonding between mother and baby well advanced. Couples have phoned LIFE's national Hotline in anguish because they have been told there's a chance, or a virtual certainty, that there is something wrong with their baby and given the weekend to decide.

The decision is a cold-blooded one. If the parents decide for abortion they have to live forever with the terrible, lingering doubt – was the baby really so abnormal, could they have coped, was it right to deny the child life?

This kind of choice can cause relationship tensions between the parents that may worsen after abortion. One woman 'phoned LIFE after the abortion of a Down's Syndrome child, distressed especially because a neighbouring family have a Down's child whom they love and who seems to live a happy life. The caller was reproaching herself and her husband for not having taken the decision to continue pregnancy.

Most people who ring LIFE say that they have had little positive help at the hospital and, indeed, have been given the result of the tests in an abrupt and hurtful way. Few of them have been told about the help that is available from the many specialist charities for disabled people.

They have met only negative and defeatist attitudes. It is not surprising that, in their despair and hurt, most couples have an abortion and then have to pick up the pieces of their lives alone – unless they find LIFE.

Right to life of disabled people

Public attitudes to disability are strangely confused. Before birth the disabled person is officially worthless – to be hunted down by pre-natal diagnostic tests and aborted.

After birth the law gives equal protection and equal opportunity to disabled people: public buildings have to have access and lavatory facilities for wheelchairs; large businesses are expected to employ a percentage of disabled people; 'normal' schools are expected to provide education for all but seriously disabled children. After birth disabled people have a chance of fair treatment and equal rights.

But if the policy is to destroy more and more of them before birth, won't that affect how we all think and feel about disabled people after birth? And the pre-natal tests are seeking to find not only Down's Syndrome and neural tube defects but also many other genetic and chromosomal disorders.

Are we not really sending this message to born disabled people: you are inferior; you should never have been born? You cost the rest of us money in extra medical care, extra educational tuition, extra everything.

The message to the parents of disabled babies is: you should have had the baby aborted, and instead of being praised for their love and courage they will be criticised, at first covertly and later openly, for their 'selfishness', and not given the support and practical help they need.

Everyone has the right to life

A truly civilised society protects everyone, even those who are not productive and active members. We no longer punish mentally ill people. We pride ourselves on the often-amazing advances made in coping with physical and mental disability. So why do we go to such lengths to seek out and kill disabled people before birth? We will not eliminate disability in this way. Most disability is caused *after birth* by disease, accident or the process of growing old.

It's bad for all of us

Disabled people are precious. They have much to contribute. They often bear witness to values which today's world overlooks and can bring out the best in others. They can give and receive much love and joy.

We are all disabled, morally, mentally or physically, to some extent. The 'able-bodied' do well to remember that.

To destroy a child because he or she is not 'perfect' is especially unjust and elitist. Of course it is not always easy to cope. But eugenic abortion re-creates, legitimises primitive phobias and prejudices about mental and physical illness, just when society seemed to be making real progress in outgrowing them. The policy of 'search and destroy' the disabled before birth is contrary to the tradition

of good medicine. It takes away the incentive to find cures. Good medicine consists in trying to conquer diseases not in killing those who suffer from them.

So much has been achieved in overcoming disabilities. Why jeopardise future progress?

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