

“Entertainment” Ultrasound

Why It’s a Bad Idea

In the past few years, a new sort of business has sprung up: entrepreneurs who offer ultrasound pictures of developing fetuses to eager parents. The idea sounds innocent at first. But when you stop and think about the possible implications, you see why this business isn’t part of professional sonography practice.

At least one key organization for the ultrasound profession opposes “entertainment” ultrasound sessions: the ultrasound-practice-accrediting group, the American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine (AIUM).

What’s Wrong With “Entertainment” Ultrasound?

First off, remember that ultrasound images are not easy to read. It takes years of education and practical experience to interpret these images correctly. In particular, it takes AIUM accreditation and ARDMS-certified sonographers.

Without that expertise, parents may find the resulting pictures of their child (whether still shots or videotape) confusing, or even alarming. They may think they see problems with their baby, whereas a certified sonographer would recognize that the child’s development was perfectly normal.

And, ultrasound results are not easily interpreted, even for the experts. The results may be ambiguous even for those with lots of experience, particularly with the newer, higher-power ultrasound machines that can display images of previously unidentifiable structures, whose clinical significance is still unknown.

Down syndrome, for example, is associated with a long list of “markers” that show up on sonograms. “Associated” is the key word here: seeing some of these markers on an ultrasound image does not necessarily mean that the fetus has Down syndrome. The markers indicate only that this syndrome might be present. Scientists are still debating what the markers really mean.

Conversely, important findings may be missed in ultrasound examinations performed just for expecting parents’ pleasure.

Of course, seeing your growing baby on an ultrasound screen has obvious benefits, too. For many women, the first peek of their baby on the screen is one of the truly wondrous moments of their lives. Suddenly, the baby is real, and the sense of a growing family gains immediacy and legitimacy—but this important bonding experience should occur during a medical ultrasound examination and not during an “entertainment” session.

There are many sound reasons why a woman should have a prenatal medical ultrasound examination, such as determining the age of the fetus, and investigating possible complications or abnormalities.

Assuring that prenatal ultrasound examinations are used only when medically necessary is one step in making certain that this important technology is preserved as a serious and high-powered diagnostic medical tool.