



**Title:** Psychosocial Aspects of Ultrasound Examinations During Pregnancy

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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.

**Reference:** Full report: TA 40 / 2001, in German, ISBN 3-908194-24-5. Short version: TA 40A / 2001, in English, French, and German, also available under <http://www.ta-swiss.ch>

## 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. Against this background, 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 expectant parents toward them. This study provides information that can serve as a basis for deciding whether these prenatal examinations should remain a part of health insurance coverage.

## Results and Conclusions:

- 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 medical care for expectant mothers.
- 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 discussion.
- Many women mentioned the fear that a discovered disorder could possibly awaken in the parents. A few patients who were affected by positive findings were also burdened by a feeling of being left alone at a time when important decisions concerning the future of their pregnancy needed to be made.
- Approximately 30% of the women surveyed stated that they had not realized at the time of the first ultrasound examination that a suspicious diagnostic finding could force them into a decision-making crisis concerning termination of the pregnancy.

## Recommendations:

- The conditions for more comprehensive and detailed counseling should be improved. It is of major importance that sufficient time be provided for discussions to allow the parents to come to terms with the information they have been confronted with.
- Counseling discussions are to be open, without placing the parents under pressure, and the doctors' basic approach is to be supportive and understanding.
- Guidelines should be developed for the correct means of caring for women who are confronted with a possible malformation of their unborn child. It is also necessary to work out concepts for cooperation among 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 in their unborn child were questioned. 128 women participated in the study. 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 involved 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, at 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 that 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.

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