

The Use of Ultrasound in Crisis Pregnancy

In the UK, pregnant women are routinely offered an ultrasound scan at 11-13 weeks for dating purposes, and at 18-20 weeks to detect any foetal anomalies. More recently, 3-D images (and even so-called 4-D, which is animation of sequential 3-D images) have brought home the reality of life in the womb.

Pregnant women are rarely scanned before 11 weeks, unless there is a complication. For this reason women in early pregnancy often have little understanding of the development of the baby inside their womb. Sometimes relatives and health professionals reinforce the idea that the developing baby is not yet a life. This perception will influence women considering having an abortion towards going ahead with the procedure, since they do not realise the nature of what is at stake. Yet from the very early days of pregnancy an ultrasound scan bears witness to new life. A heart beat can be seen from 3 weeks and 5 or 6 days after fertilisation (yes, the 'timetable' is that precise) and independent movement from 6 weeks after fertilisation. Through ultrasound we have the immeasurable privilege of seeing what the psalmist described as the baby being 'intricately woven' in the 'secret' place of the mother's womb (Psalm 139:15).



Although no longer routinely required in RCOG recommendation,¹ most women requesting an abortion are given an ultrasound scan prior to the procedure to check on gestation and for anomalies. The RCOG recommend² that women who do have a scan are offered the opportunity to see the scan images if they wish. In practice this is not always done, perhaps for fear of influencing their decision. Our local hospital had a policy of not showing a scan of twins to abortion-minded women, because so often the recognition of 'a special pregnancy' turned the mother's decision in favour of preserving life. This reveals something of the pro-abortion mindset of those providing abortion services.

Since 2008, our pregnancy centre (Tyneside Pregnancy Advice Centre) in Newcastle upon Tyne has been offering an ultrasound scan to women facing unplanned pregnancy. Since its opening two further centres have opened, in Sheffield and Salisbury, based on the same model. We believe that there is the potential for many more. As Baroness Cox said when she officially opened our centre,

So often in these circumstances, women are told that there is only a blob of tissue in their womb. The scan will help them realise that there is a little life inside of them. I hope this will be the first of many such services around the country.

Over one hundred women with unplanned pregnancy attend our centre each year. About 15% of these are referred by their GP; the rest self-refer having heard about us through word of mouth or the internet.

¹ The Care of Women Requesting Induced Abortion. RCOG Evidence-based Clinical Guideline Number 7 November 2011, 51-52.

² *Ibid.*, 53.

Women who attend are initially offered a consultation with one of our advisors who is able to provide information on issues relating to pregnancy, parenting, adoption and abortion. During the consultation women are helped to discuss the circumstances of their pregnancy, explore their concerns, and consider the moral, emotional and spiritual implications of pregnancy and abortion. Our centre also offers ongoing care and support for women, their partners and families. During a first appointment the opportunity for an ultrasound scan is offered, either immediately after the consultation or some days later according to preference and availability. Over 90% of women who attend the centre choose to have a scan.

The scan is not intended to detect foetal abnormalities nor be used as a medical service for those with pregnancy complications such as threatened miscarriage; each woman signs a form to acknowledge the limitation of the scan (we have established referral routes with local early pregnancy assessment centres for women whose scans appear abnormal). The purpose of the scan is informative, not diagnostic. It enables the woman to visualise her developing baby, as well as confirming gestational age, including looking for a heartbeat. Though our machine has the technical capacity, we do not provide 3-D scans. Though they may produce striking images in late pregnancy, early 3-D scans are less easy to interpret than 2-D scans, which clearly show the baby's outline and heartbeat.

All our staff are fully trained in early pregnancy ultrasound scanning, which includes a 2-day course, supervision of 150 scans and external assessment. For this purpose we offer early scans to local volunteers, which has turned out to be very popular and an unintended, but very effective, way of advertising the service. The ultrasound service is registered with the Care Quality Commission.

Whilst the service has occasionally been treated with suspicion by local health services, we are grateful that the centre has gradually established a good reputation amongst health professionals and the general public. Some have criticised our use of ultrasound scanning as emotionally manipulative. In response we would point out that every woman attending our centre chooses whether she has a scan or not, and that we are simply showing a truth in images – the visible presence of life – that may be denied by those around her. As Christians, we serve the Lord God of truth. We understand that, though the truth may disturb, ultimately it will be of benefit. A feedback questionnaire from women who attend confirms that they feel that their views are respected and they do not feel judged or pressured.

One woman's story:

Susan lived alone with her 18-month-old son and was pregnant again with a new partner. She had a history of drug and alcohol abuse and suffered domestic violence in the past. We were able to offer her time to talk about her situation, discuss the process of abortion, foetal development and other issues such as her financial and housing problems. Susan felt pressured into having an abortion by family and friends but also thought it was the best option for her and her son. She was keen for a scan which showed a 9-week baby with a heartbeat and limb movement. Susan was overwhelmed to see how developed the baby was and was very focused on how it was moving its feet. She felt this made it 'more human' and she wouldn't be able to have an abortion after knowing that it was a 'real baby'.

The scanner's perspective:

It is very powerful to see the effect a scan can have on a woman. We can sit and talk about a baby's development for hours but nothing has the same impact on people as seeing their own baby through ultrasound - especially when the heart beat and movement can be seen so early on.

What has been the response of abortion-minded women to a scan? More extensive data is available from the US in terms of the impact of ultrasound scanning in unplanned pregnancy. Centres there describe very high rates of women keeping a pregnancy following an ultrasound scan.³ Heartbeat International report the number of pregnancy centres using ultrasound to have grown from 500 to 1500 in the last few years. Focus on the Family's Option Ultrasound program estimates that around 358,000 babies and mothers have been saved from abortion through the impact of ultrasound.

Through our service we have only limited means of quantifying the response, but we can confirm that the impact of an early scan is often profound, as illustrated in the case study. Whilst we generally do not know the outcome, we are aware of many women on Tyneside who have decided to continue with their pregnancy after visiting the centre. We would be pleased to help anyone interested in setting up a similar service in their area.



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³ For example, <http://www.lifenews.com/2015/03/05/78-of-women-considering-an-abortion-choose-life-when-they-see-an-ultrasound/>