Is gender selection of a fetus ethical?

By Vardit Ravitsky, Special to CNN
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(CNN) -- A new maternal blood test can determine a fetus' sex as early as seven weeks into a pregnancy.

This achievement, reported last week in the Journal of the American Medical Association, is a potential boon to parents who fear their children are at risk for a sex-linked condition. If, for example, a particular disease affects only males and a fetus is female, a woman can avoid further invasive tests, such as amniocentesis, which carry a risk of miscarriage.

But this technology is igniting a heated ethical debate before it is even clinically available. Many fear that it will be used for a reason that has nothing to do with medical outcomes. They fear parents will use it for sex selection, aborting healthy fetuses that are of an unwanted sex.

They are probably right.

In countries such as China and India, the cultural preference for boys is well-documented, and parents for years have been using ultrasound and amniocentesis -- followed by abortion -- to avoid giving birth to girls. In some parts of rural India, where basic health care is hardly available, local clinics have sophisticated ultrasound machines used privately -- and illegally -- for sex selection.

Such practices have already skewed sex ratios in these countries. In China in 2005, there were 32 million more men under 20 than women. This has cast a shadow over the young men's prospects of marriage and raised concerns about social instability and expansion of the sex industry. It is bad news, too, for the women who are pressured to perform sex-selective abortions and then suffer the consequences.

It seems highly likely that this new technology, far allowing earlier, cheaper and safer testing than amniocentesis, and more accurate results than ultrasound, will only increase the number of sex-selective abortions. Thus, a technology created with the hope of promoting fetal health and the reproductive autonomy of women will probably be used in some parts of the world for nonmedical purposes and in ways that harm rather than empower women.

In the United States, research on the sex preferences of parents does not reveal partiality toward boys, and current use of sperm sorting to select for sex before conception actually shows a slight preference for girls. This circumvents the host of ethical issues raised by the selection of boys but does not make sex selection by abortion ethically unproblematic.

While the political abortion debate in the United States tends to portray a black-and-white picture of anti-abortion versus abortion rights, many ethicists paint a more nuanced picture in which the abortion right should not be called into question. This, however, does not provide different levels of justification. Different reasons for the abortion are considered.

Put simply, it is easier ethically to justify the termination of an early pregnancy than an advanced one. The physical and cognitive development of the fetus provides it with increasing moral standing as the pregnancy progresses, making the decision to abort increasingly difficult to justify.

This ethical position is also reflected in the law. In the United States, any woman has the legal right to terminate a pregnancy in the first trimester without having to provide any reason at all, and this legal right should not be called into question. This, however, does not make all reasons equal from an ethical standpoint. Different reasons provide different levels of justification. A minor physical malformation, for example, provides less justification than a life-threatening genetic condition. So what about sex?

Rejecting an otherwise wanted and healthy fetus solely on the basis of its sex provides poor justification, making sex selection for nonmedical reasons an ethically dubious choice even as early as seven weeks. This position is expressed not only by many ethicists...
but is also reflected in current surveys in Western countries showing lack of public support for fetal genetic testing for the purpose of sex selection.

The ethical implications of this new technological achievement are therefore complex in any cultural setting. While promising significant benefits from a medical perspective, it raises serious social and ethical concerns. Using it well, rather than abusing it, is a great challenge facing us all in coming years.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Vardit Ravitsky.
I agree with what DutchAtheist with the post here He has made , Yet ; Too terminate a fetus / a being of life on solely of the gender of that life , ( S ) I indeed WRONG !!! This redisects of gender pic an chose by Doctors on intersexed persons/ newborns / in what they think the gender of that ... more

mholo
Bigamy. And problem solved.
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mcclabal39
See when I first heard about this new technology, my first thought was excitement that we wouldn’t have to wait until halfway through the pregnancy to find out whether it was a boy or girl! The thought of using that information to decide whether or not to have the baby never crossed my mind. how un... more
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Babir
If your starting premise is that abortion rights are absolute and the mother can do what she wants with the baby in her body, then the whole questions of whether it is right to kill a baby because of the sex of the baby is completely moot. Actually, many argue that it is not a baby - just a fetus ... more
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DutchAtheist
Well it is if you carry gender-linked diseases in your genes. There’s nothing ethic about young children dying from a disease that could have been avoided by not letting the child be born in the first place. Even if you are against abortion, you still must agree that it is a lesser evil than deliber... more
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woodchich
I cannot believe that this dutch-cap is actually saying this Bualh!!!
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Auxu
Yeah, China and India are well on their way to being extinct, especially compared to the countless Dutch who are rapidly multiplying like most Europeans.
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wilge福特ide
Unethical and highly stupid, short sighted, immoral. The lid goes on. How do you think you can monkey with natures sex ratio, the inviolable rule that you need both a male and a female to make a baby, and think you aren’t royally screwing up society, both current and future. And why wouldn’t you ... more
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norcalmojo
This is a pretty ridiculous debate.
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DutchAtheist
In the old days, when there was a group of person desrasing female infanticide ( and eventually the mates of that group started abducting females elsewhere ), all males and adult women of that group were slain. Easy solution really, even ethical hypothetically in the sense of when they were slain, ... more
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aikamufie
It is not ethical for insurance companies to turn down children that need liver transplants by cancelling their insurance. Its not ethical for insurance companies to discriminate based on pre-existing conditions. Refusing care. But they did it anyway illegally, and everyone stood by and let it happen... more
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megapumpp
The ultimate question the article asks, is if it is ethical, and most would agree. It is not, however, ethics and necessity are very different, and maybe this is something that should be done in some countries where infanticide is common. The fear is that it would skew the gender ratio even furthe... more

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given that Indian and Chinese men are often immature princelings still used to mommy shoveling food in their mouths, I can't see the motivation. But in any case, no, it's not ethical. We are way too stupid to try to control the product of hundreds of millions of years of evolution. Same reason why... more

SharifC

root cause is the gender inequality... so the focus should on that because you can not stop science from progressing and idiots from abusing it

RobCoSystems

This is extremely bad news for women in less civilized countries (yes, I said it), where the desire to produce males is so culturally overwhelming that female infants are routinely murdered (I'm looking at you, India and Pakistan). The natural and unfortunate course of events will lead to polyandry,... more