

## This is ultrasound anguish

November 9, 2004

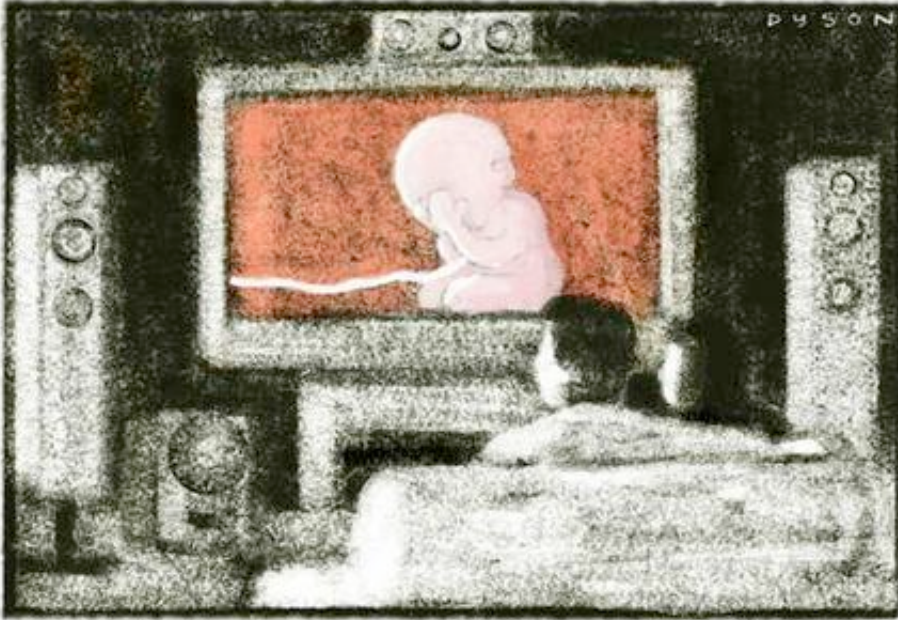


Illustration: Dyson

**Some of the so-called Christian voices in the abortion debate could show a little more compassion, writes Rachel Buchanan.**

Family First's suggestion that women seeking abortions be forced to view ultrasound "pictures" of their fetuses (*The Age*, 4/11) is not only cruel but ignorant. Many women have abortions - especially late-term ones - because of abnormalities diagnosed by ultrasound. They are hardly likely to change their minds by having to view, yet again, a series of agonising "pictures" that show their foetus has spina bifida or some other severe and possibly life-threatening anomaly.

The party's bizarre suggestion represents another step in creating a fetish of ultrasound images as "baby's first pictures", cute souvenirs of life before birth, innocent little snapshots that can be stuck on fridges or emailed to friends or pasted in albums, precursors to the Pixie portraits that will follow, post-birth.

If a still image is not enough, many parents also get a video of the ultrasound. Their babies are the stars of their own movies, long before they are even born, captured on video, able to be fast-forwarded and rewind, replayed endlessly.

In America, where women routinely have multiple ultrasounds during a normal pregnancy (my sister had 12), companies are now starting to offer non-medical ultrasounds too. Peek in a Pod studios record "pre-natal memories" on DVD or VHS. The womb is becoming the world's newest and most exclusive peep show. Ultrasounds, the window we peep through, are beginning to function like photo booths and portrait studios, surveillance cameras and home movies, a kind of *Big Brother* for the unborn.

The womb no longer offers protection from narcissistic scrutiny. *New York Magazine* recently interviewed

Andrea and Peter Rinaldi, who had had an elective ultrasound of their first child, a boy. As the pictures of Ayden Cole appeared on the screen, Andrea cooed over the unborn's "full lips and beautiful chin", his strong resemblance to her. Peter was thinking of other things. "Take a picture of his pee-pee!" he yelled.

Non-medical ultrasounds are not yet available in Australia but in a culture obsessed with visual entertainment, I don't expect they are far off. Already, Melbourne specialists report that parents are shopping around to find practices that have the latest \$300,000 3-D/4-D ultrasound machines. These machines provide high-resolution "spectacular lifelike moving foetal images" on flat screens so sophisticated that they are setting the standards for home entertainment systems. The fourth-dimension is the "real-time motion" of the images.

Mandy Sampson, clinical director of ultrasound at Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital, says obstetricians feel ambivalent about the new technology. "We don't wish to introduce 4-D machines," she says. The problem is that while the images produced by the machines may be visually impressive to the layperson, diagnostically they are not as useful as might have been hoped. There are only a few extremely rare movement-related conditions that a 4-D machine, rather than the 2-D standard, may pick up.

No matter what Family First and other "pro-life" campaigners might imagine are the miraculous emotional bonding powers of a 3-D ultrasound picture, an ultrasound is still, primarily, a medical examination - and abortion can be one of the consequences of this examination.

The first pregnancy to be terminated as a result of abnormalities diagnosed by ultrasound was in 1972. In the three decades since, ultrasounds have become a routine part of Western women's pregnancies. They confirm the presence of life and its absence. They can be the first time a woman sees her child and the last.

After a threatened miscarriage, I had my first ultrasound when I was only seven weeks pregnant. There, on the grainy orange and black screen, I saw the precious speck that would become my daughter, only 0.33 centimetres long but already with a heart that beat 120 times a minute.

That ultrasound and the two others I had in that pregnancy provided me with much-needed reassurance that my baby was still alive and looking "normal". In my next pregnancy, an ultrasound confirmed what I already knew - I had had a miscarriage. In my third pregnancy, the ultrasounds were merely another medical procedure to be endured. I felt no bond with the grainy images on the screen (although I understand that many other parents do).

Those images are not "pictures" of our babies but patterns of echoes produced by a technology that was pioneered in World War I for the detection of German submarines.

Looking at these ambiguous images, therefore, is very different from flicking through lovely baby photos in an album. Along with the pleasure or reassurance parents feel when viewing an ultrasound, is the threat of significant pain.

I have been very fortunate that viewing "baby's first pictures" - as Canadian anthropologist Lisa Mitchell ironically describes ultrasounds - has not forced me to make horrible choices. While it was very painful to see my womb empty of everything but scraps of tissue and clots of blood after a miscarriage, it would have been far worse to have seen a foetus with serious abnormalities. What if one of my 18-week, Medicare-funded scans had detected a chronic heart defect? What would I have done then?

The Royal Women's Hospital's Sampson, an obstetrician and gynaecologist with a sub-speciality in ultrasound, says if a woman decides to terminate such a pregnancy she will grieve as if she has lost a baby and feel terrible guilt. If she decides to continue, she may have to watch her baby die after it has been born and has suffered significant surgery and pain.

I am grateful that I have not had to make this decision. Rather than seeking to increase the anguish of

women who do, Christians might consider offering compassion and love instead.

Rachel Buchanan is a regular contributor to *The Age*.

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