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## Fetal gender test stirs fears

Experts worry learning sex at six weeks will spur more abortions; firm says parents just curious.

Rebecca Dube / Toronto Globe and Mail

**TORONTO** -- Girl or boy? For expectant mothers eager to find out, a new early gender test promises a 98 percent accurate answer just six weeks into pregnancy.

DNA Worldwide launched online sales of its simple finger-prick blood test, prompting fears that the technology could lead to more abortions if the fetus is of an unwanted gender. Such an early test could open a Pandora's box of emotions for expectant parents, experts say.

But David Nicholson, a spokesman for the United Kingdom-based DNA Worldwide, says most people simply want to know what color to paint the nursery. "They're just excited about having a new baby," Nicholson said. "They just want to know."

An expectant mother's blood contains her baby's DNA, so the test looks for Y chromosomes, the presence of which indicates she'll be having a boy. Women who order the test send a small blood sample to a lab in England.

The test is so sensitive that the company tells women not to do it with a man in the room, and all the lab technicians handling expectant moms' blood samples are female. Nicholson said the company offers a money-back guarantee.

The medical establishment, however, looks askance at home gender testing.

Dr. Andre Lalonde, vice president of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada, said it's a slippery slope.

In China and India, earlier prenatal testing coincided with a spike in the birth rate of boys, as female fetuses are frequently aborted.

He worries the same thing could happen in Canada.

"I see this as designer medicine, and I don't think our society is very keen on that," Lalonde said.

Susan Georgoussis, co-founder of a Toronto parenting center, doubts many parents will take the test just so that they can buy pink or blue onesies.

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"That's so not an issue at six weeks," she said, noting that miscarriage risk in the first trimester is about 30 percent.

Discovering the baby's gender might help parents get over their disappointment if they're hoping for one sex and get the other, she said.

"I hear people say, 'I don't want to be disappointed at the birth, I want to know now so I can wrap my mind around it,' " said Georgoussis, of the Becoming Maternity and Parenting Center.

But she said most parents are content to wait, at least for the ultrasound at four to six months.

Nicholson said he's received several inquiries from Canadians since international online sales began. A similar testing kit launched in the United States last year gets about 300 orders a month, Nicholson said.

DNA Worldwide has given only a couple of refunds for inaccurate predictions early on, he added.

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