

An Improved View of Little People

It's official! The world prestigious University of Michigan Medical Center (UMMC) has declared that, without doubt, our perception of unborn babies has been almost as archaic as that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau 200 years ago. He called the fetus a "witless tadpole" -- which is actually more descriptive but no more accurate than today's popular term "blob of tissue".

Now that specialists around the country have been able to see, measure and test unborn babies using heretofore unavailable technology, they have a more complete understanding of the unborn baby. They now recognize that although he or she is smaller and less developed than an infant -- just as a child is smaller and less developed than an adult -- he is nonetheless a real, little human who kicks, cries, sucks his thumb, feels, dreams, learns, exercises and even assists his mother with his entrance into our world.

"The transition from [unseen] fetus to [darling] baby is a continuum rather than an abrupt transformation" caused by birth, writes Margo Schneidman in the 1994 Winter/Spring issue of *Advance*, the magazine of the University of Michigan Medical School. Specialists at UMMC say that the hidden 7 1/2 month old fetus behaves much as its six week old, endearing, baby cousin. Physicians are coming to the conclusion "that the late term fetus and newborn baby should be treated equally."

Early in the pregnancy these unborn babies practice "in utero all the things they need later", says Timothy R.B. Johnson, M.D., professor and chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. "It's as if they are exercising for a track meet." It appears that the full-term fetus even stimulates some contractions during labor by kicking the imprisoning uterus.

Babies taking shelter in their mothers' wombs hiccup at age two months; breath, stretch, and feel their own faces two weeks later; yawn a week after that; and suck and swallow in another two weeks -- when they weigh about one ounce. Although easily seen exercising in his or her mother's womb with new high resolution ultrasound as early as five weeks after mom's first missed menstrual period, they can also be seen with the naked eye one week before that by using a fiber optic scope.

And what about the intelligence and feelings of the unborn baby? He or she appears to "seek out the receptive environment of the womb's lining" -- longing for a mutually advantageous union -- at age three days, while still a round ball of cells called the "blastula". While still weighing an ounce the unborn baby "can grimace as if crying".

"They are not what we thought", says David Chamberlain, Ph.D., president of the Pre- and Peri-Natal Psychology Association of North America. "We have not given fetuses enough credit", he continues. There is no doubt that seven month old unborn babies "hear, cry, dream, learn, and feel pain and pleasure just as infants do". In fact they "can show a preference for their mother's voice and can discriminate between two languages, preferring the 'mother tongue'".

In Dr. Chamberlain's opinion, "The womb is a classroom and it is crucial for parents to keep in mind the quality of life for the fetus inside." He urges parents to "play soothing music, sing, talk and read aloud to the fetus" as they would to other infants.

"Given any definition of the fetus as patient, the issue of rights follows close behind", adds U-M infant psychologist Thomas M. Horner, Ph.D. "The topic of children's rights is being pushed closer and closer toward the womb."

The courts, too, now recognize the unborn, seven month old fetus as the legal equivalent of its already born baby cousin, according to Edward B. Goldman, attorney for U-M Hospitals. If anyone abuses or neglects this unborn baby they have legally violated its rights according to Michigan law. He further says

that fetal surgery or other in-the-womb procedures may be legally required now that these sophisticated procedures are possible.

So far more than 40 operations have been performed on unborn babies between the ages of 18 and 28 weeks of life just at the University of California, San Francisco. Mr. Goldman "foresees a day ... [when] lawsuits could arise when a mother refuses to consent to a necessary in utero procedure."

But what if the mother consents to an abortion instead of the "necessary in utero procedure". Doesn't she have the right ... ? Attorney Goldman, alas, does not address the legal contradiction: He confirms that the courts say that "the [unborn baby] has a right to be born alive and intact". But the courts also say that the unborn baby has no right to be born alive and intact, according to Roe v Wade. Roe v. Wade. How can a mother and doctor be convicted for fetal abuse if they have the right to tear the unborn baby in pieces and throw it into a dumpster? Or does this just further prove and establish the injustice of legalized abortion, since injustice is indefensible when logically analyzed, but can justice stand the test of logic?

Copyright 1994 Ronald E. Graeser, D.O.