

Gender test spurs abortion fears

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By Briony Sowden and Martin Johnston

A new test to reveal the gender of a fetus in early pregnancy has sparked a row over whether it will lead to sex-selection abortions.

The American-designed IntelliGender test kit, which can be used from eight weeks after conception, went on sale in Australia last month. Its Australian distributor hopes to launch it in New Zealand within a fortnight.

David Portnoy, managing director of Melbourne-based Early Image, said yesterday that he was negotiating with health products companies Douglas Pharmaceuticals and API to supply the kits to New Zealand pharmacies.

He expected they would sell for about \$125.

They do not test pregnancy, so do not require state approval under the Medicines Act, unlike pregnancy tests. To use the new test, a pregnant woman mixes her urine with the kit's chemicals in the supplied container. If it turns green or black, the fetus is a boy; orange or yellow indicate a girl.

The kits are claimed to be 90 per cent accurate, but because patents have not yet been issued, the maker will not reveal the supporting data or the science of how they work.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists is worried about what the test might lead to.

"The concern we would have is that people would then terminate pregnancies on the grounds of sex selection," said college president Dr Ted Weaver.

Anti-abortion group Voice for Life echoes this concern. Spokesman Bernard Moran said abortions for sex selection were a problem overseas and the test would facilitate this in New Zealand. "Certain ethnic minorities here might be more prone to use it."

Mr Moran was concerned to learn that the approval of the Health Ministry's Medsafe unit was not required. He said that although abortions were not permitted for sex selection, they were permitted on grounds of the mental health of the woman, and the Abortion Supervisory Committee had acknowledged that the way this was applied meant New Zealand, in effect, had abortion on demand.

Mr Portnoy, responding to the concerns about sex-selection abortions based on the test, said, "I would be amazed if anybody was to do anything so drastic based on a urine test that has a 90 per cent accuracy rate."

If a woman was intent on that course, she could, for a few hundred dollars, have a much more accurate test, such as amniocentesis.

Women can also have a state-funded ultrasound scan at 18 to 20 weeks after conception, or earlier in some cases, and these can mostly determine the sex of the fetus.

Medsafe group manager Stewart Jessamine said that until the maker of IntelliGender stated how it worked, "none of us know much about it as to whether it's anything better than a guess".



The gender test is expected to sell for about \$125. Photo / BOP Times

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