



Abortion Rights
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Canada's only national political pro-choice advocacy group

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Position Paper #78

Fetal Pain

Introduction

Can a fetus feel pain? Expert Dr. David A. Grimes says fetal pain during abortion is impossible for two reasons: The nervous system network is not in place, and pain perception requires a filtering experience involving emotions and exposure to the outside world, which a fetus does not have.

Still, this is not a simple question to answer, as the only data we have is based on inferences and indirect observations, and the answer is different depending on what stage of gestation the fetus is in. This paper will go through the research on fetal pain and what the results mean from a pro-choice perspective.

Medical Research

Unlike with blood pressure or body temperature, there's no definitive way to measure pain while a fetus is in utero. Even if it were possible, pain is a subjective experience for an individual.

Pain is defined as “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage.”¹ Pain has two necessary elements: an unpleasant stimulus and an emotional response to it. Neither is possible for a fetus, according to Dr. Grimes.

Medically speaking, the general medical consensus is that it is theoretically possible that fetuses feel pain beginning in the third trimester (27 weeks gestation). A simple reason for this relates to physical fetal development. When you injure yourself, a signal travels from the site of injury through the nerves to the spinal cord, then to the brain, eventually transmitting to the cortex. Most doctors agree that the neurons and pathways that carry pain signals in a fetus are not developed until the third trimester of pregnancy.

¹ <http://www.iasp-pain.org/Education/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1698>

However, other studies go deeper, suggesting that being in the womb is a completely different environment than outside, in that the placenta serves fetal growth by encouraging sleep and thus suppressing higher cortical activation from external stimulation. In layman's terms, some scientists believe that the womb serves to block pain receptors even when they are developed in the third trimester. They argue that a fetus' brain also requires context from the outside world in order to process pain in a psychological sense. Not until the placental cord is cut and it is exposed to the outside environment and starts breathing, can a baby begin to sense and feel.

Conclusion

While there is some evidence that fetuses may be capable of feeling pain around 27 weeks gestation, this does nothing to further an anti-choice argument, as virtually no abortions happen in the third trimester unless for medical issues (such as the fetus having severe medical problems, or serious health complications for the woman). See ARCC Position Paper #22 - *Late Term Abortions (after 20 weeks)*. When rare third trimester abortions occur, doctors administer the drug digoxin to ensure fetal demise before the procedure begins.

Most abortions occur in the first trimester (before 12 weeks)² when there is no chance of a fetus feeling pain, as they haven't developed the nervous system or spinal cord to transmit pain to the brain, and even those few done in the late second trimester do not cause any pain to the fetus for the same reason.

While scientists continue to study the topic of fetal pain, we can be confident that it has no bearing on abortion rights for women and transgender people.

Sources / Further Reading

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