



## ***Position Paper #83***

### **“Crisis Pregnancy Centres” and Sonography:**

#### ***Their non-medical use of ultrasound requires regulation***

“Crisis Pregnancy Centres” (CPCs) are anti-choice agencies that present themselves as unbiased medical clinics or counselling centres, and whose ostensible goal is to provide pregnant people with non-judgmental information on all their options when faced with an unintended pregnancy. However, CPCs are not medical facilities. In fact, most are Christian ministries, and they generally will not refer clients for abortion or contraception. Many promote misinformation such as the existence of “post-abortion distress” which is not a medically recognized condition, or they promote exaggerated physical risks of abortion.

CPCs in Canada are not currently regulated. Some are able to situate themselves near legitimate abortion providers or medical clinics, and they tend to use ambiguous advertising to suggest that they provide abortion care in an effort to recruit clients.

Ultrasounds are one of the tools used by several CPCs in Canada to dissuade people from seeking abortion.<sup>1</sup> CPCs and the volunteers who staff them believe that persuading clients to view an image of their fetus will reduce the number who choose abortion. These centres use non-medical ultrasounds as an opportunity to manipulate people into continuing with their pregnancies.

If this weren’t problematic enough, the use of ultrasounds by CPCs as a tactic to advance their own agenda can cause serious harm.

Ultrasound scans, including fetal ultrasounds, are medical procedures and should only be used when there is a medical reason to do so. Health Canada recommends that ultrasound be used

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<sup>1</sup> As of February 2023, four CPCs are known to be offering ultrasounds: Atwell Centre in Hamilton ON, Crossroads Clinic in Brooks AB, Gianna Centre in Edmonton AB, and Women’s Care Centre in Fredericton NB.

prudently and only by qualified health professionals for medical purposes.<sup>2</sup> The following bodies have also created policies or issued statements supporting a position against the non-medical use of ultrasound:

- Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC)<sup>3, 4</sup>
- Canadian Association of Radiologists (CAR)
- College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan<sup>5</sup>
- College of Physicians & Surgeons of Nova Scotia<sup>6</sup>
- American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine<sup>7</sup>
- Sonography Canada<sup>8</sup>
- International Society of Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynecology<sup>9</sup>
- World Federation for Ultrasound in Medicine and Biology<sup>10</sup>

The joint policy statement issued by SOGC and CAR voiced strong opposition to the non-medical use of fetal ultrasound. It stated:

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<sup>2</sup> Health Canada, "Ultrasound". (Oct 10, 2019). <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-risks-safety/radiation/medical/ultrasound.html>

<sup>3</sup> Salem, S., Lim, K., & Van den Hof, M.C. (2014 February). "Joint SOGC/CAR policy statement on non-medical use of fetal ultrasound." *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology Canada*, 36(2), 184–185. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1701-2163\(15\)30666-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1701-2163(15)30666-6)

<sup>4</sup> Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC). (2023) "Non-medical ultrasound" <https://www.pregnancyinfo.ca/your-pregnancy/routine-tests/non-medical-ultrasound/>

<sup>5</sup> College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan, "Ultrasound for Non-Medical Reasons", Policy (November 2013, reviewed 2018). [https://www.cps.sk.ca/imis/CPSS/Legislation\\_ByLaws\\_Policies\\_and\\_Guidelines/Legislation\\_Content/Policies\\_and\\_Guidelines\\_Content/Ultrasound\\_for\\_Non-Medical\\_Reasons.aspx](https://www.cps.sk.ca/imis/CPSS/Legislation_ByLaws_Policies_and_Guidelines/Legislation_Content/Policies_and_Guidelines_Content/Ultrasound_for_Non-Medical_Reasons.aspx)

<sup>6</sup> College of Physicians & Surgeons of Nova Scotia, "Professional Standard Regarding Obstetrical Ultrasound for Non-Medical Reasons", (March 2013). <http://www.cpsns.ns.ca/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?PortalId=0&TabId=129&EntryId=35>

<sup>7</sup> American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine (May 19, 2020). "Prudent Use and Safety of Diagnostic Ultrasound in Pregnancy." <https://www.aium.org/resources/official-statements/view/prudent-use-and-safety-of-diagnostic-ultrasound-in-pregnancy>

<sup>8</sup> Sonography Canada, "Use of Ultrasound for Non-Diagnostic Purposes " (Oct 1, 2018) at pg 47 in Professional Practice Guidelines and Member Policies". <https://sonographycanada.ca/app/uploads/2019/11/PPGuideline-and-Policies-Sept-2018-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Salvesen, K. et al., "ISUOG-WFUMB statement on the non-medical use of ultrasound, 2011", *Ultrasound in Obstetrics & Gynecology* 38.5 (2011): 608. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/uog.10107/pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Salvesen et al., 2011

Although there is no definitive evidence of fetal abnormalities or harmful biological effects linked to diagnostic ultrasound in humans, the procedure involves targeted energy exposure to the fetus, and therefore a theoretical risk for effects on fetal development, as suggested by studies of biological effects of ultrasound reported at or near diagnostic intensities in both human studies and animal models. Of particular concern are recent studies in animal models that report subtle effects on the physiology and development of the fetal brain.

With the non-medical use of fetal ultrasound, the maintenance of technical safeguards, operator training, qualifications, expertise, standards for infection control, and governing competency are no longer ensured. As a result, fetal energy exposure may not be appropriately monitored, and operators of the equipment may not be adequately trained to recognize fetal and placental abnormalities that may adversely affect fetal and maternal outcomes.<sup>11</sup> *[Citations omitted.]*

The Food and Drug Administration in the United States has also strongly discouraged the use of non-medical ultrasound imaging and recommended that ultrasound only be “done only when there is a medical need, based on a prescription, and performed by appropriately-trained operators.”<sup>12</sup> The FDA cautioned that ultrasound radiation can slightly heat tissue and produce gas bubbles (known as cavitation), the long-term effects of which remain unknown.

The concerns raised by these professional and governmental organizations arose following the widespread establishment of businesses offering keepsake ultrasound photos and videos for expectant parents. However, the concerns raised regarding to those facilities apply with equal force to CPCs.

The individuals working and volunteering at CPCs are not typically medical professionals. While CPCs appear to recruit certified sonographers specifically to operate the ultrasound technology, these workers may be volunteering their time to the CPC and thereby providing care outside the boundaries of their discipline’s professional requirements, with no accountability to their professional associations (Canadian Association of Radiologists and Sonography Canada). Further, the organizational bias of CPCs creates a risk that ultrasound images will be interpreted and used to support their own anti-abortion agenda.

Misinterpreting ultrasound images can delay pregnant people from seeking real medical care. If they are interested in abortion but given inaccurate information from a CPC, they may not seek

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, Salem et al., 2014

<sup>12</sup> United States, Food and Drug Administration, “Avoid Fetal ‘Keepsake’ Images, Heartbeat Monitors”, FDA Consumer Health Information, (Dec 16, 2014). <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/avoid-fetal-keepsake-images-heartbeat-monitors>

out abortion care in a timely manner. If they are interested in continuing with their pregnancies, they may not receive medically necessary information, such as the fact that they have an ectopic pregnancy or fetal abnormality. Ectopic pregnancies are not typically viable and, if left untreated, can be fatal to the pregnant women. Fetal abnormalities can be serious or even lethal to the fetus. By holding themselves out as competent ultrasound providers, CPCs put pregnant people at risk of having complications go untreated, or dealing unexpectedly with the emotional trauma of having to seek a later abortion or raise a severely disabled child.

CPCs perform ultrasounds not for medical reasons, but to confront women with an image of their fetus. The purpose of the ultrasound is not to clients about their health or the health of their fetus, but to manipulate them into continuing with an unwanted pregnancy, regardless of circumstances. Such ultrasounds have not been recommended by a physician, and the information gathered is not necessarily passed along to the pregnant person's eventual physician. Ultrasounds performed for the purpose of fulfilling a CPCs anti-choice agenda cannot and do not qualify as a medical procedure.

In considering the risks of non-medical use of ultrasound, the SOGC/CAR joint statement encouraged governments to find appropriate means to deal with this public health issue. Similarly, the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada calls upon the provincial governments of Canada to regulate or prohibit the non-medical use of ultrasounds in CPCs, and to ensure that people facing unwanted pregnancies receive competent medical care.