



Abortion Rights  
Coalition of Canada

*Your  
Voice for Choice*

Coalition pour le droit à  
l'avortement au Canada

*Canada's only national political pro-choice advocacy group*

POB 2663, Station Main, Vancouver, BC, V6B 3W3 • info@arcc-cdac.ca • www.arcc-cdac.ca

---

## **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 women 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 discredited link between abortion and breast cancer and the existence of “post-abortion syndrome” which is not a medically recognized condition.

CPCs in Canada are not currently regulated. They are often able to situate themselves near legitimate abortion providers and 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 a growing number of CPCs in Canada to dissuade women seeking abortion.<sup>1</sup> CPCs and the volunteers who staff them believe that persuading women to view an image of their fetus will reduce the number of women who choose abortion. These centres use non-medical ultrasounds as an opportunity to manipulate women 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 prudently and only by qualified health professionals for medical purposes.<sup>2</sup> The following bodies have also created policies or issued statements supporting this position:

- Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC)
- Canadian Association of Radiologists (CAR)
- College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC<sup>3</sup>
- College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario<sup>4</sup>
- 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 (formerly the Canadian Society of Diagnostic Medical Sonographers and the Canadian Association of Registered Diagnostic Ultrasound Professionals)<sup>8</sup>
- International Society of Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynecology
- World Federation for Ultrasound in Medicine and Biology<sup>9</sup>

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

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>10</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>11</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. They may lack the medical training necessary to safely administer an ultrasound and to interpret ultrasound images and to identify fetal and placental abnormalities. Their organizational bias also creates a risk that they will interpret ultrasound images according to their own agenda.

Misinterpreting ultrasound images can delay women from seeking real medical care. Women who are interested in abortion but given inaccurate information from a CPC may not seek out abortion care in a timely manner. Women who are interested in continuing with their pregnancies may not receive medically necessary information, such as the fact that they have an ectopic pregnancy. Ectopic pregnancies are not typically viable and, if left untreated, can be fatal to the pregnant women. By holding themselves out as competent ultrasound providers, CPCs put women at risk of having complications go untreated.

To the extent that CPCs and other anti-choice organizations may argue that they employ certified sonographers and therefore provide medical ultrasounds, such a claim ignores the purpose of their “services”. CPCs perform ultrasounds for the purpose of forcing women to view an image of their fetus. They perform the procedure not in an effort to inform women about their health or the health of

their fetus, but in an effort to manipulate women into continuing with an unwanted pregnancy, regardless of the circumstances. Such ultrasounds have not been recommended by a physician, and the information gathered is not necessarily passed along to the pregnant woman'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 consideration of 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 women facing unwanted pregnancies receive competent medical care.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> As of July 2015, four CPCs had obtained ultrasound equipment: Crossroads Clinic in Brooks AB, Edmonton Pregnancy Crisis Centre in Edmonton AB, Your Pregnancy Options in Abbotsford BC, and Women's Care Centre in Fredericton NB.
  - <sup>2</sup> Health Canada, "Fetal Ultrasound for Keepsake Videos", Catalogue# 0-662-35355-2 (Ottawa: Health Canada, November 2003). <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/med/ultrasound-echographie-eng.php>.
  - <sup>3</sup> College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia, Professional Standards and Guidelines, "Non-medical Use of Ultrasound", (January 2012). <https://www.cpsbc.ca/files/pdf/PSG-Non-medical-Use-of-Ultrasound.pdf>.
  - <sup>4</sup> College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, "Fetal Ultrasound for Non-Medical Reasons", Policy Statement #4-10, (May 2010). <http://www.cpsoc.on.ca/policies-publications/policy/fetal-ultrasound-for-non-medical-reasons>.
  - <sup>5</sup> College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan, "Ultrasound for Non-Medical Reasons", Policy (November 2013). [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, "Keepsake Fetal Imaging", Official Statement, (April 2012). <http://www.aium.org/officialStatements/31>.
  - <sup>8</sup> Sonography Canada, "Professional Practice Guidelines and Policy Statements for Canadian Sonography", (January 2014) at 6. <http://www.sonographycanada.ca/Apps/Pages/professional-practice-guidelines-7>.
  - <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> Salem, Shia, Kenneth Lim, & Michiel C. Van Den Hof. "Joint SOGC/CAR Policy Statement on Non-medical Use of Fetal Ultrasound." *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada* 36.2 (2014): 184-85. <https://sogc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/gui304PS1402E.pdf>.
  - <sup>11</sup> United States, Food and Drug Administration, "Avoid Fetal 'Keepsake' Images, Heartbeat Monitors", FDA Consumer Health Information, (January 2015). <https://www.fda.gov/downloads/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/UCM095602.pdf>.