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What Are the Ethical Issues With Screening Newborns for Prenatal Alcohol Exposure?

What is this research about?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is the leading cause of a developmental disability (DD) that could be prevented. The quality of life of people with FASD is improved when they begin interventions at an early age.

It is not yet possible to screen a fetus for FASD before birth. Tests are under development that could be used to identify newborns that have been exposed to alcohol in the womb. There are ethical concerns that must be considered before a prenatal alcohol exposure (PAE) test is done. This research talks about the common ethical concerns related to screening for FASD.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers conducted a literature review using 3 databases. A variety of key words connected to FASD were used for the literature search. Ethical concerns with PAE tests were found after a review of relevant literature.

What did the researchers find?

The key ethical issues that influence PAE screening are:

- Population: The most ethical option for PAE screening is for everyone to have the test done. However, universal screening may not

What you need to know:

Screening for prenatal alcohol exposure can lead to improved quality of life for people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. There are ethical concerns with conducting these tests. The most common ethical concerns will be discussed.

be cost effective. Yet, testing only groups perceived to be at risk supports stigma about these groups of women. Women who drink during pregnancy generally have to deal with shame and judgment. Screening at-risk groups also misses other target groups of women and infants.

- Consent and stigma: The ethical choice for PAE screening is where a woman agrees to the test. The stigma associated with drinking during pregnancy can cause fewer women to agree to have their infant tested; however, opt-out programs put undue stress on women, who may hesitate to say no to a PAE screen due to fear of judgment.
- Cost-effectiveness: PAE screening is ethical when there are follow-up programs for the woman and infant. If there are no programs then the benefits of the screen are limited and women are exposed to stigma that can lead to

feelings of guilt.

- **False Results:** Tests should be reliable before being used. Any positive result from a PAE will result in a woman dealing with undue stress due to the stigma of drinking during pregnancy. False positives can cause a woman to experience these stresses when she would not have if the test had shown a true negative. In either case the stress caused by stigma can have negative effects on the woman and the fetus. False negatives mean that an infant will not receive the interventions that could help them.
- **Confidentiality and Follow-up:** Ethical screening programs will ensure women's information is kept private. Otherwise, women will have to deal with the stigma and guilt related to drinking during pregnancy. These experiences could lessen a woman's interest in engaging with FASD programs for her and her infant.
- **Criminal prosecution:** Legal coercion is unethical as it challenges women's rights and puts infants with FASD at greater risk. Women who drink may be less likely to seek medical help for themselves or their child in fear of legal recourse.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers will learn the ethical concerns with creating policies around PAE screening.

Practitioners will learn why some women will be wary of PAE screening and FASD intervention programs.

About the Researchers

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Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Prenatal, Alcohol, Ethics, Neuroethics, Screening

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