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# Prenatal screening deficiency

## Shortage of doctors in Canada prohibits genetic testing of all pregnant mothers

By Becky Rynor, Canwest News Service



A doctor performs routine prenatal screening on a pregnant woman.

**Photograph by:** Joel Robine/AFP/Getty Images, Canwest News Service

Canadian physicians may face more wrongful-birth lawsuits if they don't start adhering to guidelines introduced one year ago recommending all pregnant woman be offered prenatal screening for chromosomal abnormalities, according to an article to be published today by the Canadian Medical Association Journal.

But one of the authors says not all doctors are aware of the guidelines, nor are there enough medical practitioners in Canada to provide the lengthy counselling pregnant women should be getting.

"This is not a short conversation. This is a very, very long conversation," Dr. Jeff Nisker, a professor of obstetrics, gynecology and oncology at the University of Western Ontario, said on Monday.

"Physicians are now directed to offer counselling and the opportunity for testing to all pregnant women. But Canada is so short in the number of physicians per population ... that it's very hard for them to do this."

In February 2007, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada and the Canadian College of Medical Geneticists endorsed guidelines that recommend pregnant women of all ages -- not just those over 35 -- have access to prenatal screening for genetic anomalies.

The article says that recommendation stems from a finding that 56 per cent of women who give birth to a child with Down syndrome are under 35 years old.

The screening, which can detect Down syndrome and such neural tube defects as spina bifida, was previously offered only to women age 35 and over.

"Because medical-school positions were cut back throughout the '90s in most provinces, we're in a very difficult situation in Canada for family physicians and obstetricians to be able to actually provide the service that the guidelines ask them to," the article reads.

The Canadian screening guidelines are similar to those in Europe, but Nisker said there are twice as many doctors per population there to provide the required counselling.

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He says Canada needs to drastically increase the number of medical-school positions and residency programs in family medicine and obstetrics and gynecology.

"The legal actions in the past have occurred because the counselling did not occur and the woman felt it should have occurred," he said.

"We need to have strategies in place to rapidly double or triple the number of doctors per population in Canada, because we should be doing this counselling because the guidelines dictate it must be done and doctors have to be given the time to do it.

And the only way for that to happen is for there to be more doctors taking care of pregnant women."

Saskatchewan has offered genetic tests to mothers of all ages since 2003, while Ontario has done so since 2000, according to its government website.

The more than 80 per cent of expectant mothers who opt for the screening -- an ultrasound and then a blood test within the first 18 weeks of pregnancy -- have their babies checked for Down syndrome and defects such as spina bifida.

Doctors can also order tests to check for the respiratory and digestion disease, cystic fibrosis, and the blood disorders, thalassemia and sickle-cell anemia, when warranted by ethnic background and family history.

In 2003, a judge ordered a B.C. doctor to pay more than \$200,000 to the parents of a child with Down syndrome in a "wrongful birth" suit, ruling the doctor's actions prevented the parents from learning about the condition in advance and having an abortion.

The physician in Richmond, B.C., allegedly failed to make sure that Lydia Zhang, the mother, received an amniocentesis test that would have identified the birth defect.

Zhang says she would have ended the pregnancy had she known about the condition.

(With files from the Saskatoon StarPhoenix)

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