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Webinar explores prenatal testing and abortion

by Jerry Filteau



Esperanza Linares receives prenatal care from nurse Peggy Yancy in Pheonix Sept. 9, 2009. (CNS photo/Andrew Junker, Catholic Sun)

WASHINGTON -- Most prenatal tests that show serious abnormalities in the child end up in an abortion, panelists on a national webinar said Oct. 5.

The panel, convened at the Catholic University of America in Washington, argued passionately for prenatal and perinatal support systems that would enable women to bring such children to term rather than aborting them.

'We are aware of statistics indicating that 90 percent of unborn babies diagnosed with Down syndrome will be aborted,' said Marie Hilliard, director of bioethics and public policy at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia and moderator of the panel.

'In England,' she added, 'a study indicated 86 percent of those with neural tube defects such as spinal bifida will be aborted.'

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Dr. John Bruchalski, an obstetrician-gynecologist and founder of the Tepeyac Family Center in Fairfax,

Va., confirmed Hilliard's observation that most unborn children receiving a prenatal diagnosis of a lethal or even nonlethal disability are aborted.

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"We live in a society that expects no illness, nor imperfections," he said. "These numbers are accurate. My cousin with Down syndrome once asked me if he was an endangered species. I had no words for him."

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The Tepeyac Family Center, an ob-gyn group practice founded on Catholic pro-life principles, includes a hospice program for babies expected to die at or soon after birth.

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"It is not uncommon for mothers who have terminated to note that they had not understood carrying to term was an option," he said. "Perinatal hospice programs are not very common yet."

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He said the fact that the average ob-gyn physician will be sued four to six times in his career over children born with defects helps lead those doctors to suggest abortion as a solution when prenatal diagnosis unveils problems.

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The National Catholic Partnership on Disability organized the 90-minute webinar, or Internet seminar, which about 250 health care, diocesan, parish or other groups across the country followed live by computer. Nancy Thompson, NCPD director of programs and diocesan relations, said it was not possible to say how large the total audience was because groups that registered could range from two or three people to 200 or so.

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The NCPD has posted resource materials on health care and ministry to women bearing children with disabilities and said it planned to post the transcript and video of the webinar on its Web site.

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Panelists included two women involved in outreach ministry to such women and their families: Tracy Winsor, a co-founder of the support network Be Not Afraid in Charlotte, N.C., and Monica Rafie of Chicago, founder of the online support organization, BeNotAfraid.net.

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Both stressed the need for immediate and ongoing support for women who want to bear their child despite the possible advice to the contrary from doctors and others.

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Capuchin Fr. Dan Mindling, a moral theologian from Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md., stressed that in church teaching each child is a child of God, and genetic defects or disabilities do not lessen his or her human dignity and worth.

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He noted that in church teaching prenatal testing is permissible only if it is aimed at ensuring the health of the child, not if an adverse finding may lead to an abortion.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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