

# Pro-choice's guinea pigs



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The birth of my fourth granddaughter two weeks ago — healthy, a good weight — was the occasion for joy and relief in equal measure.

My daughter's pregnancy had first been fraught with ominous signs of imminent miscarriage. Then the worry was a probable extremely pre-term birth (at 24 weeks' gestation, her high-risk specialist ominously murmured, "Let's try to get you to 28 weeks ..."). Even on bed rest she was offered only 5% odds of going 37 weeks (she made it to 39!).

This was our family's first experience with an abnormal pregnancy. In the course of the unwanted adventure I acquired an education in the risks associated with prematurity, today a feature of one in eight births.

The most harrowing risk of an extremely pre-term birth (XPB) — under 28 weeks gestation — is cerebral palsy. The risk is about 38 times higher in XPB than in the overall newborn population.

Sometimes XPB is just bad luck. Sometimes it isn't. According to obstetrician Barbara Luke's classic *Every Pregnant Woman's Guide to Preventing Premature Birth*, "If you have had one or more induced abortions, your risk of prematurity with this pregnancy increases about 30%." After two, a woman's chance of an XPB doubles. A woman who has had four or more abortions runs *nine times* the risk of XPB, an increase of 800%.

Studies of black American women throw the problem into bold relief. Black American women, although

only 12% of the American population, undergo 35.2% of all abortions. In 1987 it was reported in *The New England Journal of Medicine* that black American women with two previous abortions had a 91% higher relative risk of a subsequent pre-term birth.

As far back as 1967, Dr. Malcolm Potts — himself a robust defender of abortion — writing in *The Eugenics Review*, noted: "There seems little doubt that there is a true relationship between the high incidence of therapeutic abortion and prematurity. The interruption of pregnancy in the young (under 17) is more dangerous than in other cases."

(Of the approximately 120,000 abortions performed annually in Canada, the repeat rate is more than 29%, and amongst teenagers repeats are four times as high as for older women.)

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This concession by Potts, who actually believed in eugenics, well before the organized and militant ideological polarization on abortion we're so familiar with, gives the lie to pro-choicers insisting such claims are "scare tactics" fabricated by pro-life activists.

But you won't find a future-pregnancy prematurity risk on pro-choice Web site fact sheets. The National Abortion Federation's states: "Comprehensive reviews of the data have concluded that a vacuum aspirational procedure in the first trimester poses virtually no risk to future reproductive health."

Since "suction" is the standard abortion method, I wondered if abortion

clinics give actual potential clients a more nuanced picture. So I asked a friend in her 30s to do some sleuthing in person.

"Johanne" visited two abortion clinics in Montreal.

The Morgentaler clinic does not offer consultations prior to abortions. One signs the consent form and proceeds directly to the abortion. A consultation was only reluctantly arranged at Johanne's insistence.

Johanne asked a number of questions, including: "Is there a risk associated with a second abortion?" Answer: "No, and the proof is that [the woman] is fertile ... One, two, three abortions, there are no risks."

At the Clinique Médicale de l'Alternative, Johanne was received with less suspicion. As at the Morgentaler, there is no consultation prior to the abortion. (I stress this because where prior counselling is offered, as in Sweden, fewer women choose to abort).

Johanne asked a doctor there the same questions, and again, was there a risk to future pregnancies associated with a second abortion? "No, a woman can have one, two, three, four, five abortions with no problem ..."

In response to Nazi atrocities in human experimentation, the Nuremberg Code was adopted in 1964. The code insists on animal studies before exposing human beings to any procedure. All surgical procedures in Canada have been tested on animals. Except one. There are no published animal studies on vacuum aspiration abortion.

So the fact that women are guinea pigs is something else you won't see on the pro-abortion fact sheets or on consent forms. What other abortion risks are women not being warned about? Too many to mention in one column, that's for sure.