

Choosing gender is deadly for little girls

By **EVE GLICKSMAN**

Expectant parents can spend months arguing the relative merits of naming the baby Chloe or Sara, Justin or Michael. But medical advances portend more fertile ground for disagreement. The up-and-coming after-dinner debate: Shall we order a boy or a girl?

Currently, a baby's gender can be determined as early as 10 to 12 weeks into pregnancy with a test called chorionic villus sampling. Amniocentesis can do the same at 16 weeks. But it is now possible in the laboratory to separate the X and Y chromosomes in a man's sperm with 75 percent accuracy prior to conception. Since the male's X chromosome produces a girl, and the Y, a boy, couples can then employ artificial insemination to improve Mother Nature's odds.

In a few years, doctors predict that couples will be able to select the sex of their child with 100 percent accuracy. No more guessing about whether to wallpaper the nursery pink or blue. To date, the Ericsson technique (named after its originator) has been used primarily by couples trying to eliminate sex-linked genetic diseases in their families such as hemophilia or Duchenne muscular dystrophy, which are passed on almost exclusively to boys. Others opting for the procedure have been those desperate for a son after having several daughters, or vice versa.

But could the technology be encouraging a shopping mentality where we'd one day screen genetic material for height, hair color and intelligence? Might the "wrong sex" begin to be treated as something akin to disease? Use of the Ericsson technique for families with no history of a sex-linked disorder is overstepping the bounds of medicine, say many physicians.

In the patriarchal cultures of China, Korea and India where males are valued more than females,

abortion of female fetuses has sky-rocketed since gender-detection tests became widely available in the early 1980s.

While the world birth average is 102.5 boys per 100 girls, there were 117 boys born to 100 girls in Korea in 1985. This prompted Korean officials to ban doctors from revealing fetal gender. In China where government policy allows only one child per family, amniocentesis is called the successor to female infanticide, which is thought to have been common in

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imperial China.

At a Bombay hospital performing amniocenteses, all but one of 8,000 women requesting sex-typing between 1978 and 1982 wanted a son. In India, daughters are resented because they confer low social status and because parents can incur a lifetime of debt to pay for wedding and dowry.

The government of one Indian state now restricts the amniocentesis to women over 35 and others at high risk for genetic disorders. Even after birth, though, 300,000 more girls than boys die annually in India — the victims of neglect, discrimination or infanticide through poisoning or choking, according to a 1990 UNICEF report.

Could this happen in the United States? Pennsylvania is the first state to criminalize abortion on the basis of fetal gender and a number of other states are considering the same. Still, though some doctors assume that it does happen occasionally, there is no hard evidence that abortions are being sought for sex selection.

Over 90 percent of abortions in this country occur within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy before the sex of the fetus is generally known. Abortion-rights advocates decry Pennsylvania's gender-based abortion restriction as a horror tactic aimed at chipping away other reproductive freedoms.

No one can say, though, how many couples will want to choose their baby's sex before it's conceived, should the option become available. "As long as it's healthy" is the way most expectant parents respond to the boy or girl question. Probing further, however, studies show that the large majority of Americans want gender-balanced families — a boy and a girl. More revealing, two-thirds of those polled wanted their first child to be a boy, and the second, a girl.

Is this a subtle suggestion that male children are the priority in our culture, too? After all, it's the son who carries on the family name and the daughter who earns 71 cents to the man's dollar. Then, there's the issue of who usually cleans the bathroom when both spouses work. A 1989 Gallup poll of both sexes confirms that 49 percent believe men have a better life, while only 22 percent thinks women do.

Also, if couples could plan the gender order of their children, would this create a "favorite son" phenomenon? Psychologists have found that first-borns tend to have certain social advantages, being the highest achievers, for example. If parents were able to choose the sex of first-borns, countless females would, likely lose out on the perks that go along with being oldest.

It is frightening to think that the gender makeup of this country could be skewed by made-to-order babies. What's worse is having little doubt about which the favored sex would be.

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