

# British Catholics concerned over possible prenatal test for autism

LONDON – A British study raising the possibility of a prenatal test for autism has prompted concerns among Catholics that pregnant women will be pressured to abort babies who might develop autism.

Although no test has yet been developed, a team of scientists led by Simon Baron-Cohen, a professor at Cambridge University, found evidence to suggest babies exposed to high levels of testosterone in the womb have a higher risk of developing autistic traits than those who were not.

A spokesman for the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales issued a statement Jan. 13 calling for creative answers to autism, an umbrella term for a range of lifelong developmental disabilities in communication, interaction and imagination.

"What our society is contemplating are the first steps of a truly revolutionary and inhuman path," said the spokesman.

"The only way out is to rediscover the fundamental dignity and value of every human life from its first beginnings," he said. "Without this firm moral bedrock, we are in grave danger of sliding inexorably toward a new eugenics."

Helen Watt, director of the Linacre Centre for Healthcare Ethics, a London-based Catholic bioethical institute, said in a Jan. 14 statement to Catholic News Service that "unless prenatal treatment for autism is available, a prenatal test would be disastrous."

"All autistic people have the same right to live as anyone else. Parents of autistic children should be supported, not invited to end their children's lives before they have even got to know them," she said. "Life can be difficult for autistic people and their families, but it is also full of meaning. The infamous 'solution' of abortion needs to be avoided at all costs."

The latest study, published Jan. 12 in the British Journal of Psychology, measured

levels of fetal testosterone in the amniotic fluid of 235 women who underwent amniocentesis during pregnancy.

When their children – 118 boys and 117 girls – were between 6 and 10 years old the mothers completed questionnaires that measured their children's autistic traits, including whether they were good at remembering telephone numbers or if they preferred solitary rather than social activities.

“High levels of fetal testosterone were found to be associated with high scores on two separate measures of autistic traits,” the study said. “High scores on these measures of autistic traits reflected poorer social skills, imagination and mind reading but good attention to and memory for detail.”

Baron-Cohen said in the article that the study was significant because it “highlights for the first time the association between fetal testosterone and autistic traits.”

But he stressed that the research did not demonstrate that elevated fetal testosterone was associated with a clinical diagnosis of autism because “that would need a sample size of thousands, not hundreds,” meaning that the development of a screening test is by no means imminent.

Mr. Baron-Cohen added, however, that he was planning to test for such an association in the near future.

A spokesman for Britain's National Autistic Society, which supports people with autism and their families, said in a statement in early January that many of their members were “understandably worried about the impact genetic or prenatal testing may have on their lives and on public perception of the condition in the future.”