Alternative to Amniocentesis

FACT: A recent issue of the Health News Report (December, 1976) contained a news item relating the development at the Stanford University School of Medicine of a blood cell sorting machine. Studies have indicated that a few cells become detached from the fetus during pregnancy and enter the bloodstream of the mother. The Stanford machine is so sensitive that it is able to examine several thousand cells a second from the mother's bloodstream, sort out various types, and distinguish the mother's own cells from those that have been shed by the fetus. It appears possible to analyze these fetal cells as early as the fourth month of pregnancy in order to determine the presence of birth defects. If such an analytical technique becomes feasible, amniocentesis will in many cases be unnecessary. Without exposing the mother and fetus to the risks associated with the amniocentesis procedure, it will be possible to gain the same information through a technique no more dangerous than taking a blood sample.

COMMENTARY: It is commonly remarked that advances in medical technology frequently present themselves as morally ambiguous, and this development here provides an excellent case in point. On the one hand, there can be no question that the development of safe, easy, and inexpensive techniques of diagnosis is in itself highly desirable. Amniocentesis has been declared a safe (i.e., no longer experimental) procedure by the National Institutes of Health; nevertheless, there does exist some risk (see Ethics and Medics, 1, 1, p. 2), and a procedure that avoids such risks is certainly to be preferred. On the other hand, the proposed alternative procedure of maternal blood sampling carries with it the morally significant consequence of making it easier for a woman contemplating abortion in case of genetic defect to achieve a diagnosis and thus procure an abortion should the test be positive. It is reasonable to believe that some women who would abort in the event of a positive diagnosis have been deterred by the expense, danger, unavailability, or difficulty of the amniocentesis procedure. The relative ease and safety of the blood sampling technique may permit more women to obtain prenatal diagnoses and thus lead to more abortions for genetic reasons. Furthermore, the ease of the new procedure may ultimately result in increased pressure for prenatal diagnoses of all pregnancies, thus reducing society's tolerance of defective children and parental freedom of choice. A society in which prenatal diagnoses are as simple as blood tests would have to be on its guard lest such an attitude of intolerance become widespread. Opposed to this attitude of intolerance is one of affirming the goodness of life as a gift from God, even life which may not be perfect from the standpoint of merely human standards. In his allocution given to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives on October 29, 1951, Pope Pius XII declared:

The apostolate of your profession imposes upon you the duty of making other people know the respect and esteem of human life which you cherish within you because you are convinced of the truth of Christianity. When the need arises, you must defend it boldly, and when necessary and you are able to do so, you must protect the defenseless and still hidden life of the child, supporting your action with the force of the Divine Commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20,13) ("Moral Questions Affecting Married Life," National Catholic Welfare Conference, #13).