

Babies are born deformed after new Down's test

By Peter Pallot, Health Services Staff

A TEST increasingly used on pregnant women to check for Down's syndrome in their babies has been suspended at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, amid fears that it could be causing serious deformities in a "very high" number of cases. The ban was imposed after five in 320 babies were found to have severe facial and limb abnormalities.

The test — chorion villus sampling — is being used in about 50 hospitals, on about 7,000 women a year, mainly on mothers in the late 30s and early 40s.

Mr Ian MacKenzie, consultant obstetrician in Oxford, said: "There are five cases we have identified where foetuses have suffered abnormalities in 320 to 330 patients who had chorion villus sampling in the first nine and a half weeks of pregnancy. That is a very high figure."

He added: "Having identified the problem we feel obliged to report it and warn others of the possible risk. The foetal deformities may have occurred by chance. I am not saying that other clinics should change their practices."

Mr MacKenzie said he was asking all women who had had the test to return so that further checks could be made to find whether the foetus had been injured.

Chorion villus sampling is rapidly taking over from amniocentesis as a test for Down's syndrome because it can be performed earlier in pregnancy — about eight weeks — when a termination is less traumatic.

A needle is inserted either through the vagina or the stomach wall so a few cells from the placenta can be gathered for laboratory testing.

Mr MacKenzie said his department recently switched to sampling through the abdomen because it was thought that route carried less risk of inducing miscarriage.

"We have no reason to think the abnormalities could be because of direct needle contact with the foetus," he said.

He said gynaecologists were speculating that extracting cells could damage the vascular system in the unborn.

Several of the deformed foetuses had been terminated when the abnormalities had been detected on later ultrasound tests.

He stressed that chorion villus sampling was very valuable in picking up Down's cases and other diseases. It was used in one per cent of pregnancies and amniocentesis in about four per cent.

The rate of abnormalities in Oxford was "way above" figures recorded elsewhere.

About 850 chorion tests had been done at the John Radcliffe. The problem appeared to arise when the test was carried out earlier than nine and a half weeks.

Prof Geoffrey Chamberlain, obstetrician at St George's Hospital Medical School, west London, said last night that doctors should await publication of a European study of 3,000 patients comparing chorion villus sampling with amniocentesis.

A draft of the results may be published in two or three months.

The chance of a baby being damaged by a needle was remote, Prof Chamberlain said, especially when it was inserted through the vagina, the technique practised at St George's.

Down's syndrome affects one in 650 babies. The incidence rises with the mother's age. A woman of 40 has a one in 40 chance of carrying a Down's baby.

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