

The Obligations of Pregnancy
March 14th

Reading: "Calming Pregnancy Fears," "ACOG Pregnancy Exercise Guidelines," "9 Tips for a Fit Pregnancy," "Smoking for Two: A Dangerous Pursuit," "Wanting a Baby? Get Your Weight Under Control Now," "Eating for Two," "Is Seafood Safe During Pregnancy?" "Since When Am I Public Property?" All available at <http://pregnancytoday.com/reference/indexpreg.htm>

Recently we have been discussing whether or not fetuses have rights, what obligations people have towards them, and the morality of abortion and stem cell research. We have also discussed debates about babies born premature: who has the right to make decisions about their care and future, what obligations can doctors and governments put on their parents, etc. The readings for this lecture look at a related question: what obligations do mothers have to provide an optimal developmental environment for embryos and fetuses. Does such an obligation exist? What is entailed? Who has the authority to determine what pregnant women ought or ought not do? There is not yet a good historical literature on the subject, so I have assigned a collection of pregnancy advice columns that are available today. Lecture will fill in the background and context.

There are countless books (the most famous and problematic is *What To Expect When You're Expecting*), magazine articles, brochures, and now websites, that offer advice to pregnant woman. pregnancytoday.com just happens to be a convenient one, with loads of articles. When you go to the page initially, look at the overall context -- advertisements, links, images, to get a sense of the big picture. Scroll through the titles of the advice columns and see what's interesting. I chose a representative selection that cover the big topics (diet, exercise, smoking). As you read the columns, pay attention to a series of general issues. What is the recommendation? What evidence does the author have to justify the recommendation? What makes the author an authority on the subject? Is the woman obliged to follow the advice?

A bunch of things jumped out at me in the different columns:

"Easing Expectant Fears": Where is the line between healthy worry and pathological worry? Does pregnancytoday.com do more harm than good?

"ACOG Pregnancy Exercise Guidelines": Are obstetricians experts in exercise physiology? If there is no evidence that exercise is dangerous, why does ACOG (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) make a series of recommendations about exercise? If you have to stop when you feel short of breath or fatigued, can you exercise?

“9 Tips for a Fit Pregnancy”: Is this medical advice or just plain common sense (e.g. would anyone really go kickboxing during pregnancy)?

“Smoking For Two”: The author makes all sorts of claims about health effects of smoking. Do you think that there is good data that smoking during pregnancy increases criminal behavior in the offspring? Should mothers who smoke be blamed for bad outcomes?

“Wanting a Baby”: Does the author take a consistent position about nature vs. nurture? Obesity is famous (along with height) for being the human trait most under genetic control (heritability > 90%). Can this be reconciled with this column?

“Eating for Two”: The author states “When a woman becomes pregnant, she has an obligation to provide her growing fetus with the best nutrition and the healthiest lifestyle.” What is the source of this obligation? What are its consequences?

“Is Seafood Safe During Pregnancy”: The author states that the risk of getting sick from raw shellfish is 1/250,000 (vs. 1/25,000 for chicken). But the author recommends against shellfish (while chicken is tolerated). What is going on?

“Since When Am I Public Property”: Why are pregnant women subjected to so much advice? Does the “public” have a right to ensure the healthful development of fetuses?