

Evidence of Fetal Pain Continues to Accumulate

By Dave Andrusko

A new study has put another nail in the coffin of the argument that there is no credible evidence unborn babies experience pain prior to the 29th week of gestation.

A team led by Prof Maria Fitzgerald, from the department of anatomy and developmental biology at University College London, published an article in the April issue of the Journal of Neuroscience which used sophisticated diagnostic tools to show that premature babies do experience real pain.

Researchers employed near-infrared spectroscopy to measure blood levels and oxygenation in the brain before, during, and after nurses lanced babies' heels to extract blood. As the New York Times wrote, the question was whether there would be "surges of blood and oxygen in the somatosensory cortex, the part of the brain that processes sensations from the body's surface and is known to be linked to feelings of pain in adults." There were such surges even in the most premature babies.

Nonpainful tactile stimulation like tickling of the bottom of the foot, did not evoke a change in cortical blood flow, the researchers reported.

Dr. Fitzgerald wrote that "While previous research shows that even the youngest newborn infants are capable of displaying behavioural, physiological and metabolic signs of pain and distress, the measures are all indirect and could be dismissed as bodily reflex reactions rather than measures of true pain." In other words, Dr. Fitzgerald was saying that previous to their study of 18 babies born at between 25 weeks and 37 weeks in the neonatal unit at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Obstetric Hospital in west London, the evidence for pain in premature infants was indirect and inferential.

At one level many would argue this is much ado about nothing new. For some time there has been, if not a complete consensus, a near-consensus among neonatologists that when premature babies cry and kick their legs out when poked with needles, they were experiencing "real pain."

But at another level, having the "lights go on" (surges of blood and oxygen in somatosensory cortex) gives an added confirmation that "the information about pain reaches the brain in premature babies," to quote Prof. Fitzgerald.

As readers of Today's News & Views and NRL News know, only a few months ago pro-abortion activists produced a bogus "study" that purported to prove that there is no good evidence that the unborn feel pain before 29 weeks (during the seventh month).

Dr. Paul Ranalli is a neurologist at the University of Toronto. He told NRL News that there is not a shred of developmental difference between an unborn baby at 24 weeks and a premature baby born at the same age. "The only difference is that the newborn takes in air through his or her lungs rather than through the umbilical cord."

The new study is another piece of evidence in a long trail of research that affirms what careful anatomical studies have already revealed: that the ascending pain fibers reach the cortex by 20 weeks, if not earlier.

These findings obviously add additional impetus for passage of the Unborn Child Pain Awareness Act. This bill would require that abortion providers give women seeking abortions after 20 weeks after fertilization (22 weeks gestation) certain basic information on the substantial evidence that their unborn children may

experience pain while being aborted, and advise them regarding any available methods to reduce or eliminate such pain.

There is another fascinating tentative conclusion in the Journal of Neuroscience study. There is a suggestion that babies "remember" the painful experience which could "lead to an increased sensitivity to other, non-painful, procedures."

According to Prof. Fitzgerald, "Since pain information is transmitted to the pre-term infant cortex from 25 weeks, there is the potential for pain experience to influence brain development from a very early age as the brain is highly malleable at this stage."