Mother’s Little Helper: Fetal Microchimerism

The powerful emotional attachment a mother experiences toward her child is not the only enduring bond between them. In 1981 medical researchers were surprised to discover the presence of fetal cells in maternal tissue. In other words, a baby exiting the mother’s womb leaves behind a little something “to remember me by.” This phenomenon, called fetal microchimerism, has become the subject of many medical investigations in the last few years.

Initial investigations conducted on post-partum women suffering from autoimmune disorders (Nelson 1996) led to a “bad microchimerism” hypothesis that the presence of fetal cells in the woman’s blood had triggered an autoimmune response designed to remove the “foreign” cells.

Further study, however, pointed in the opposite direction, toward a “good microchimerism” hypothesis. According to research conducted at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, “Women with rheumatoid arthritis often have their disease improve or even disappear during pregnancy. A beneficial role of fetal microchimerism is suggested by our finding that elevated levels of fetal microchimerism significantly correlated with pregnancy-induced amelioration of rheumatoid arthritis.”

A study performed in 2001 (Johnson et al) implicated fetal cells in the spread of lupus in a patient, but a later study (Mosca 2003) demonstrated that the fetal cells had a therapeutic rather than harmful function. While investigating autoimmune disease, Artlett et al (2002) likewise found that “patients with a history of prior pregnancies had a later onset of disease…and a lower rate of death than women who had never been pregnant”(Johnson and Bianchi).

Bianchi et al (2001) found that miscarriage or abortion may trigger the transfer of fetal cells to the mother’s body so that even “pregnancy as brief as a few months may have important long-term health consequences for women” (Johnson and Bianchi). A study published in the Journal of the AMA in 2004 (Adams and Nelson) arrived at similar conclusions.

More recently (2007) a study published in the October 1 issue of Cancer Research suggests that fetal microchimerism may reduce the risk of breast cancer. Fetal cells were found significantly more often in healthy women than women with a history of breast cancer, 43 percent versus 14 percent respectively, suggesting that the fetal cells offered protection of some kind.

Investigation into the possible benefits of fetal microchimerism continues. Meanwhile, those of us who have marveled at the enduring powerful attachment we feel toward our babies can say, “See, it’s not all in my mind…it’s in my body, too.”

This article is condensed from “Fetal cells in maternal tissue following pregnancy: what are the consequences? (Kirby L. Johnson and Diana W. Bianchi, Human Reproduction Update 10:6, 497-502, 2004)."
It Even Sounds Ugly

In February of 2007, the Georgia State Senate held hearings on House Bill 147—a bill requiring that abortion clinics offer women the opportunity to undergo an ultrasound and view the sonogram. Mary Boyert, representing the Archdiocesan Pro-life office, invited participants of the PATH program to speak at the hearings. They were invited to address the potential benefits viewing a sonogram might present to a pregnant woman. One of our participants responded in the following account.

It’s such an ugly word...abortion. It even sounds ugly.
I was only 19 years old--on top of the world--a star athlete with a full scholarship, an A student on the Dean's list....and pregnant. With no family to turn to or any who would understand my position, my partner and I decided to terminate the pregnancy. Everything in me was telling me how wrong, how profoundly wrong, it was...but I felt I had no choice.
We chose a clinic and he drove me there assuring me the whole way that everything would be fine, and I believed him, because I NEEDED to. After all of the blood work and paperwork and a very short video, we sat in the waiting room...waiting. There was no counseling, no talking, no education...just business as usual. You pay the price, and we provide the service.
After waiting some time, I heard my name called and I went into a room in the back. I knew I was going to be put under, and I was grateful for that, so I got undressed and waited for the Doctor to come and rid me of this horrible condition I had gotten myself into.
Instead of the Doctor, a nurse entered the room and told me to lay on the table. She proceeded to administer an IV to me and started me on the meds to put me to sleep. As I was getting more and more sleepy, she put ultrasound gel on my stomach and started to perform an ultrasound of my baby.

PATH Well-Represented at March for Life

It was a bitterly cold, rainy day which made it even more of a sacrificial effort I think. I felt so honored to help carry the banner, honoring mine and the millions of aborted children that have died since Roe v. Wade. I was grateful for the opportunity to validate my daughter's life and the lives of so many others! Mary Jean Roberts

Pictured below (Lto R): St. Jude 8th graders Ryan Tschirhart, Paul McNeil, Nick Beach, Allen Tschirhart, and Peter Craig.
PATH Ministries Expand in 2007

PATH employs three part-time professional and administrative staff. We couldn’t, however, begin to meet the demand for our core services—the retreats and Bible studies—without the generosity of over 30 volunteers, including 3 deacons and a number of priests who celebrate Mass and reconciliation for the women and men who attend our retreats. We are grateful to the three “new” priests who joined us this year.

Volunteer facilitators, supported by paid and volunteer staff, organized and hosted three retreats serving 18 women and conducted six Bible study-format post-abortive healing courses benefitting 12 women and men. Courses met weekly for 14 consecutive weeks. Participants were encouraged to attend one of the quarterly retreats.

Paid and volunteers counselors provided services to 24 individuals and responded to 83 inquiries by phone and over 200 by email.

“Graduates” of PATH Bible studies and retreats went on to establish Rachel’s Vineyard retreat ministries in Tupelo, MS, Asheville, NC, Birmingham, AL, and Chattanooga, TN. “Graduates” of the Asheville program went on to establish the Rachel’s Vineyard ministry in Knoxville, TN and Charlotte, NC. These retreat teams, combined, served approximately 32 additional individuals in 2007.

Three PATH facilitators attended a leadership conference conducted by Kevin and Theresa Burke, authors of the Rachel’s Vineyard Retreat process used by PATH; they learned about new research on trauma and the brain, as well as techniques for facilitation.

Martha Shuping, board member and psychiatrist, presented a summary of current research on mental health effects of abortion to Sen. Brownback’s Senate Value Action Team meeting in July and flew to Northern Ireland to prepare materials for use in the ongoing debate over legalizing abortion.

PATH was well-represented by our facilitators at such Atlanta area events as the annual Eucharistic Congress, the Rise Up for Life program at Christ the King Cathedral, and the March for Life at the state capital. We attended Georgia Senate hearings regarding House Bill 147, which requires that abortion clinics offer each pregnant woman the opportunity to view a sonogram of her in utero baby. This bill passed in 2007. We also made presentations at St. Benedict’s Catholic Church, Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church, and St. Jude the Apostle Catholic School.

Big Thank You to Metro Area Churches

What would we do without the help of local churches who support our work by “lending” us their priests to celebrate Mass and reconciliation at our quarterly retreats and by supporting us financially through, in some cases, regular monthly stipends and, in other cases, collections taken at Mass.

We want to thank Holy Spirit, Mary Our Queen, OLA, Prince of Peace, St. Andrew, St. Ann Pro-Life, St. Ann Knights of Columbus, St. Jude, St. Monica, St. Peter Chanel, St. Thomas More, and Transfiguration for their financial support and Christ the King, St. Marguerite D’Youville, Mary Our Queen, OLA, All Saints, Prince of Peace, St. Stephen the Martyr parishes and St. Pius X High School for clerical support.

We also want to thank St. Michael’s parish in Woodstock for hosting a parish fundraiser for PATH in December (see gift card at left).
The Elliot Institute, best known for the publication of research into the effects of abortion on women in such titles as *Making Abortion Rare* and *Forbidden Grief*, is now sponsoring a public relations campaign to support local organizations in bringing the message of healing after abortion to their communities.

The ad campaign includes content formatted for radio and TV, billboard and print, posters and fact sheets, bumper stickers, T-shirts, bookmarks, and business cards. A “co-op version” is available in some formats so that local sponsors can add their own content such as the name of their organization.

Mix and match fundraising, political action, and introductions kits are available to organizations who want to target the “un-choice” message to specific goals. Additional kits for students, educators, and pastors are in the works.

In addition to advertising materials, the Elliot Institute provides a detailed advice on how to set up your advertising campaign to produce maximum benefit while avoiding pitfalls. The Ads 101 webpage offers, for example, the following caveat: *Before advertising, be mindful of widespread unwanted or even forced abortions and diverse audiences and experiences. A good, but out-of-context, ad can confuse some or cause others to feel misjudged.*

Other advice includes: how to run an ad campaign for cheap, how to create a simple media plan, how to keep your message before the public for maximum benefit, and 10 ways to blow your ad campaign.

Featured at left is a sample print ad. “Un-choice” materials include eleven additional print ads/posters, two 30-second TV spots, 4 60-second radio spots, a package of Mother’s Day products, and art for bumper stickers, billboards, and T-shirts.