



Case Study: Fetal Abnormality

Jessica is a 30-year-old immigrant from Mexico City. She and her husband Marco have been in the U.S. for the last three years and have finally earned enough money to move out of their Aunt Maria's home and into an apartment of their own. They are both hard workers. Jessica works 50 hours a week at a local restaurant and Marco has been contracting side jobs in construction. Six months before their move to an apartment, Jessica finds out she is pregnant.

Four months later, Jessica and Marco arrive at the county hospital, a large, public, nonteaching hospital. A preliminary ultrasound indicates a possible abnormality with the fetus. Further scans are conducted and it is determined that the fetus has a rare condition in which it has not developed any arms, and will not likely develop them. There is also a 25% chance that the fetus may have Down syndrome.

Dr. Wilson, the primary attending physician, is seeing Jessica for the first time, since she and Marco did not receive earlier prenatal care over concerns about finances. Marco insists that Dr. Wilson refrain from telling Jessica the scan results, assuring him that he will tell his wife himself when she is emotionally ready for the news. While Marco and Dr. Wilson are talking in another room, Aunt Maria walks into the room with a distressed look on her face. She can tell that something is wrong and inquires of Dr. Wilson. After hearing of the diagnosis, she walks out of the room wailing loudly and praying aloud.

Marco and Dr. Wilson continue their discussion, and Dr. Wilson insists that he has an obligation to Jessica as his patient and that she has a right to know the diagnosis of the fetus. He furthermore is intent on discussing all relevant factors and options regarding the next step, including abortion. Marco insists on taking some time to think of how to break the news to Jessica, but Dr. Wilson, frustrated with the direction of the conversation, informs the husband that such a choice is not his to make. Dr. Wilson proceeds back across the hall, where he walks in on Aunt Maria awkwardly praying with Jessica and phoning the priest. At that point, Dr. Wilson gently but briefly informs Jessica of the diagnosis, and lays out the option for abortion as a responsible medical alternative, given the quality of life such a child would have. Jessica looks at him and struggles to hold back her tears.

Jessica is torn between her hopes of a better socioeconomic position and increased independence, along with her conviction that all life is sacred. Marco will support Jessica in whatever decision she makes, but is finding it difficult not to view the pregnancy and the prospects of a disabled child as a burden and a barrier to their economic security and plans. Dr. Wilson lays out all of the options but clearly makes his view known that abortion is "scientifically" and medically a wise choice in this situation. Aunt Maria pleads with Jessica to follow through with the pregnancy and allow what "God intends" to take place, and urges Jessica to think of her responsibility as a mother.