



**SOCIAL AND ETHICAL DETERMINANTS OF THE USE OF ROUTINE
ANTENATAL SCREENING TESTS**

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LIST OF CONTENTS

	Page
Statement of originality	i
List of contents	ii
List of tables	iv
Abstract	v
Acknowledgments	vii
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Chapter 2. Grounding the research question	
2.1 The history of antenatal screening	6
2.2 The epidemiology of screening	16
2.3 Opposition to antenatal screening	25
2.4 The 'hazards'	32
2.5 Trends in antenatal screening	39
2.6 Policy	41
2.7 The research question	46
Chapter 3. Methodology	49
Chapter 4. Results	
4.1 Response	60
4.2 Sample characteristics	60
4.3 Perceived utilisation of routine antenatal screening tests	65
4.4 Information about routine antenatal screening tests	69
4.5 Perceived value of routine antenatal screening tests	75
4.6 Expectations of routine antenatal screening tests	88
4.7 Fears and anxieties about pregnancy and outcomes	94
4.8 Consideration of termination of pregnancy	112

	Discussion - Introduction	114
Chapter 5.	Discussion - Sociological Analysis	
	5.1 The notion of risk	115
	5.2 Trust, compliance and medical sovereignty	128
Chapter 6.	Discussion - Ethical Analysis	
	6.1 Informed choice	139
	6.2 Individual rights	148
	6.3 Altruism	154
	6.4 The act of screening	162
	Discussion - Conclusion	170
Chapter 7.	The future	
	7.1 Implications	171
	7.2 Where to now?	184
Chapter 8.	Conclusion	189
	Excursus	193
	References	197
	Appendices	220
	Related Publications	252

This thesis sets out to analyse and understand some of the social and ethical determinants of the use of contemporary routine antenatal screening tests in Australia and their implications for future policy and practice.

In 1995, a cross-sectional study of 376 postnatal women at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, Victoria was conducted. In addition, 21 semi-structured interviews were performed. Consumers' beliefs and values related to pregnancy, birthing outcomes and antenatal screening were explored.

The findings of this study demonstrate that there is a complex interaction of social and ethical factors that determine the use of routine antenatal screening tests by pregnant women. In particular, this study identifies pregnant women's perception of risk as a dominant factor in the use of antenatal screening. The socio-cultural foundations of this risk perception are complex. In addition, the findings demonstrate that, because of women's high trust in, compliance with and reliance on medical input into their pregnancy care, medical dominance of antenatal care is often disguised as consumer demand.

This study also demonstrates that, in an 'opt out' or routine system of screening, high utilisation rates were achieved at the expense of loss of informed choice for some participants. Disturbing differences in information delivery and information perception are found between public and private patients. Other determining factors identified are pregnant women's altruism, their perception of their individual rights and the act of offering screening. These factors, in part, explain why the number and frequency of antenatal screening tests is increasing and why tests, once introduced, are difficult to remove from the repertoire of routine use.

The thesis identifies new criteria that are important for the evaluation of antenatal screening programs and for best practice in antenatal care. Failure to incorporate these criteria into current antenatal screening program evaluation has implications for the increasing medicalisation of pregnancy and childbirth, the widening of the gap in expectations between consumers and health care providers with resultant conflict and the increasing drain on health care resources.