

News

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DALLAS--Two genetic counselors say there is no need for a normal healthy couple to have a 'genetic check-up' before having children.

Drs. Jan Friedman and Mary Jo Harrod are assistant professors of obstetrics/gynecology at UT Southwestern Medical School. Friedman is also head of the school's new Division of Clinical Genetics.

"If a couple is worried about something in the family, they do need counseling," Harrod said.

Most people get better news than they expect.

Unfortunately, not everyone gets good news. For example, a couple with a child born with Tay-Sachs disease finds the chance for another child having the disease to be one out of four.

For diseases such as Tay-Sachs and Down's syndrome that can be diagnosed prenatally, the counseling clinic works closely with the amniocentesis clinic. Diagnosis through amniocentesis (drawing amniotic fluid from around the fetus) and genetic testing is possible for less than one-fifth of the women who have had a child with a birth defect. There is no prenatal test available for the remaining diseases.

In 1978 the clinic will perform about 150 amniocentesis tests. There are probably 2,500 women at risk due to their age or previous history in the north and west Texas region served by the clinic. Women over 40 having a baby are at a higher risk than average for having a child with Down's syndrome (mongolism).

"Since some women in this group consider abortion on the fear of having an abnormal child, amniocentesis is a life-saving test most of the time. In the six years we've been doing amniocentesis, only six women out of more than 200 have had abnormal fetuses and have chosen to end their pregnancies," said Dr. Harrod.

The counseling team includes social worker Elizabeth Hunter, who helps patients deal with their feelings. Ms. Hunter also works with the birth defects clinic and the cranio-facial clinic at Children's Medical Center.

"Genetic disease is very emotionally charged. There's a lot of guilt associated with transmitting an abnormal gene, and there's anger and frustration. People need more than the hard facts," said Friedman.