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Original
Antibiotic prophylaxis before amniocentesis / Hobbins, Jc; Pilu, G; Abuhumad, A; Alfirevic, Z; Bahado Singh, Ro; Benacerraf, Br; Berkowitz7, Rl; Cetin, I; Copel, Ja; Eik Nes, S; Frusca, Tiziana; Galan, Hl; Guaschino, S; Mahoney, Mj; Marsal, K; Malinger, G; Marconi, Am; Martinelli, P; Moore, Tr; Papageorghiou, At; Platt, Ld; Rizzo, N; Tabor, A; Thilaganathan, B; Timor Tritsch, Ie; Todros, T; Yagel, S.. - In: PRENATAL DIAGNOSIS. - ISSN 0197-3851. - 31:12(2011), pp. 1213-1214. [10.1002/pd.2842]

Availability:
This version is available at: 11381/2681574 since: 2016-10-05T17:54:32Z

Publisher:

Published
DOI:10.1002/pd.2842

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12 October 2024

PRENATAL DIAGNOSIS
Prenat Diagn 2011; **31**: 1213–1214.
Published online in Wiley Online Library
(wileyonlinelibrary.com) **DOI**: 10.1002/pd.2842

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Antibiotic prophylaxis before amniocentesis

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We are writing to make your readers aware of events stemming from a published Letter to the Editor in *Prenatal Diagnosis* (Ferrazzi, 2010) that has led to actions that could appreciably threaten our future ability to discuss and pose questions about methods chosen and conclusions drawn by authors of published papers.

In a Letter to the Editor, Professor Enrico Ferrazzi (Ferrazzi, 2010) asked some important questions about the methodology, informed consent, oversight, and follow-up procedures in a study by Giorlandino *et al.* (2009) that involved the use of antibiotics to diminish procedure-related fetal loss following second trimester amniocentesis. The study had been a subject of a previous Letter to the Editor (Alfirevic and Pilu, 2009), who had suggested that the study results 'must be interpreted with caution'. In his letter, Professor Ferrazzi addressed some other aspects of the study, and he requested that the authors provide additional information for clarification. Unfortunately, this triggered a lawsuit against Professor Ferrazzi, filed in an Italian court by Professor Giorlandino, based on the contention that the letter caused 'moral damages', and that it resulted in a loss of revenue for the private corporation headed by Professor Giorlandino.

Letters to the Editor represent invaluable avenues for open exchange of ideas and investigative debate that often reflect directly on patient care. This has long been a part of the scientific process, which also includes an internal review of the letter itself. Specifically, Letters to the Editor allow members of the scientific community to openly comment, criticize, and seek clarification on what has been reported in original articles. In essence, it has epitomized academic freedom at work.

The common practice has been for authors simply to address in print the concerns of the letter writer, and then to move on. In this case the response was not just to answer (Giorlandino *et al.*, 2010), but to sue. This response to a letter of scientific query could dissuade, if not completely stifle anyone's desire to question in print ANY published paper.

We believe that academic leaders, the editors of scientific journals, and the academic community at large, should be aware of what is transpiring in Italy, and be alert to the potentially chilling implications of this lawsuit. We believe that Prof. Ferrazzi is entitled to write a letter to the editor expressing his concerns, and we sincerely hope that this anomalous response to a legitimate scientific inquiry will go no further.

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DOI: 10.1002/pd.2842

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