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### Documentary on ethics of prenatal tests to premiere at UM

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# The University of Montana

NEWS RELEASE

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Missoula, MT 59812  
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Jan. 11, 1994

## DOCUMENTARY ON ETHICS OF PRENATAL TESTING PREMIERES AT UM JAN. 31

### MISSOULA --

New genetic technology enables prospective parents to gather information about their baby long before it is born. With that knowledge come responsibility and sometimes agonizing choices when tests reveal possible abnormalities.

"The Burden of Knowledge," a new video documentary co-produced by University of Montana ethics Professor Deni Elliott, explores the social pressures and ethical issues related to prenatal testing. The 50-minute documentary will premiere at UM Monday, Jan. 31, followed by a panel discussion of issues raised by the video.

The program is scheduled from 7 to 9 p.m. in the Urey Lecture Hall. Panelists will include Dr. John Opitz of Helena, chair of Shodair Hospital's Department of Medical Genetics; Dr. Jan Willms, director of Missoula's Institute of Medicine and Humanities; and UM philosophers Albert Borgmann and Deborah Slicer. Dennis O'Donnell, UM's Mansfield Professor of Asian Affairs, will moderate the panel.

"What I'm trying to do is to promote public discussion around the new moral dilemmas that are raised by genetic information," Elliott said.

Prenatal genetic information is available in some form to all pregnant women in the United States. At least 340 fetal variances are now detectable before birth, and that number is increasing rapidly as genetic research continues. Test results, even if inconclusive, can play a major role in a

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woman or couple's decision to keep or abort a baby.

"The Burden of Knowledge," intended for public television broadcast and showings throughout the nation, examines the issues through interviews with women and couples who are coping with the implications and realities of easily accessible fetal information. One woman struggles with the decision whether to undergo a test to detect Down syndrome, knowing that her risk of having a baby with that condition is statistically the same as her chances of having a miscarriage because of the amniocentesis.

Personal stories are interwoven with commentary from geneticists, critics, physicians and disability rights activists. The documentary also features powerful visual images, including scenes of childbirth, amniocentesis and a fetal autopsy.

The program was co-produced by Elliott, UM's Mansfield Professor of Ethics and Public Affairs; Bob Drake, an independent filmmaker in Hanover, N.H.; and Wendy Conquest, a research fellow at Dartmouth College's Institute for the Study of Applied and Professional Ethics. The documentary is supported through grants from the Montana Committee for the Humanities, the New Hampshire Humanities Committee and the Greenwall Foundation.

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**Editors, news directors, reporters:** For more information or to preview the documentary contact Deni Elliott, 243-2988.

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