Attitudes towards Prenatal Genetics Among Southeast and East Asian Women: a Qualitative Pilot Study

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Cultural values influence perceptions of genetics within Asian populations. Protection of the collective well-being and reputation of the family unit, known as “saving face,” factors into genetic decisions such as pregnancy termination and disclosure of family medical history. The non-directive model of American genetic counseling also conflicts with the Asian model of paternalistic health care. Prior studies provide conflicting evidence with regards to positive or negative correlation between education, acculturation, awareness of genetic testing, and positive perceptions of genetic testing. The aim of this study was to describe attitudes towards prenatal genetics among Southeast and East Asian women as well as sociocultural factors influencing those attitudes. 23 Asian women who were members of various Asian cultural organizations were interviewed via telephone about their attitudes towards prenatal genetic counseling, prenatal genetic testing, and termination of pregnancy. Participants expressed diverse views about the role of genetic counselors as health care providers, particularly in regard to psychosocial counseling and non-directiveness. Decision outcomes varied widely for genetic testing and pregnancy termination and were influenced primarily by religious and spiritual beliefs, fatalism, and risk-benefit analysis. Discussion of cultural factors showed that societal shame and stigma of disabilities, lack of available resources, family authority over an individual, and social normalization of testing and termination may also influence pregnancy decisions. These findings may allow prenatal genetic counselors to gain a richer, more nuanced, and more empathetic understanding of their Asian patients.

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