

Private scan clinic missed three baby defects in a week

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Pregnant women are using private high street clinics rather than NHS hospitals for their 20-week foetal scan, to get round NHS Covid-19 restrictions that force them to undergo the scan alone.

Window to the Womb (WTTW), with 37 clinics in the UK, offers health checks from 16 weeks into pregnancy and allows women to bring "one adult companion".

But WTTW sonographers missed three spina bifida cases in a single week in May, according to a letter passed to this newspaper. In each case, an internal review said the symptoms had been "visible" in the three babies. A fourth case occurred last month.

Spina bifida stops the spine and spinal cord developing properly in the womb.

Christoph Lees, professor of obstetrics at Imperial College London, warned: "If a problem is missed in one of these clinics then of course this will give false reassurance and may mean that the woman is less likely to seek NHS imaging and care, which could mean that important diagnoses are not recognised." There is no evidence the women in these four cases missed their 20-week NHS scan.

A sonographer at WTTW, a franchise that performs about 175,000 ultrasound scans each year, said appointments had "exploded" because people wanted to bring partners. "The Covid crisis

has pushed women into the private sector," the sonographer said. "The demand is so high some clinics can't keep up. Some women are dropping the NHS scan because they can't go with their partners.

"For wellbeing checks, I am expected to carry out a scan on a 16-week foetus the size of an apple and the appointments are 15 minutes apart." The NHS allocates up to 30 minutes for each scan.

"At the same time, I'm expected to take between 20 to 25 pictures of the baby for the mother, which can be difficult, depending on the size of the mother and the position of the baby. And also checking for the gender. It's a complete rush," the source added.

WTTW sells packages that include a "4D scan" (live 3D scans of the foetus moving) and teddy bears with a recording of the baby's heartbeat for £79-£99.

A letter to staff from directors, on June 9, says: "In all cases, on review, the scan technique did not adhere to our scan protocols."

A director said he "did not recognise" the conditions described by the source.

A spokesman said: "We only use qualified sonographers because quality assurance is extremely important to us and sadly this year alone we have had to refer hundreds of patients into the NHS for additional screening as part of our checks."

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