

Fetatalogue

Early learning.

Julian Tang

Dr Kramer was ecstatic: a simple device (earphones included) worn on a belt over a pregnant woman's growing bump that converted the brain impulses of the developing fetus into its first, audible thoughts. Which mother-to-be would not want one?

Initial, small-scale trials had been very promising. True, the 'thoughts' were very basic, single-word utterances such as "hungry", "tired" or "noisy". Dr Kramer expected nothing else from a fetus with no experience of language. That the device worked so well was enough for him to expand the trial to 100 women.

He was sitting at his desk in his hospital office, reading through the fetal diaries of his trial participants, all of whom had faithfully recorded the daily thoughts of their fetus for the past month. He was about to close the folder, when he noticed something odd about one of the newer diaries. It was bulkier than the others but stopped about a week earlier.

He flicked through the pages, then returned to the beginning and read more slowly in growing amazement.

The volunteer was Christine Smith, now about 32 weeks pregnant. Clearly, he needed to interview her, and he swiftly arranged to see her the next morning. On the phone, at least, she did not give any indication that anything was wrong.

Christine arrived punctually and sat down, looking at Dr Kramer expectantly. She was a tall, rather gangly woman in her thirties, so her increasing bump size looked rather comical. She was the secretary to one of his clinical colleagues from another department, so he already knew of her from work.

"Good morning Christine, how's the baby?" he asked, putting her at ease.

"Fine thanks," she said, feeling her bump, reflexively. "Actually, I'm thinking about withdrawing from the trial."

This was not what he'd expected. "Ah, well that is certainly well within your rights, but might I just ask you a few questions about your diary, first?"

"Sure, no problem."

"Before I do, can you have a quick look at these?" He handed her some sheets of paper.

"I've blanked out the names of the



women who wrote them, but they are all diaries like yours. I've got about a hundred women in this trial and none of them know each other. So none of them should have seen each others' diaries," he explained. "Actually, I'm not supposed to show you these, but it will help you understand why I wanted to talk to you this morning."

Christine quickly scanned the sheets, most of which summarized a month of fetal dialogue in a few pages. Some had been handwritten, others had been typed — like hers. However, her version ran to more than 20 pages.

"All of them seem very short," she commented, handing them back to him. "Also, they seem to report only very basic expressions. Is something wrong with their babies?"

Dr Kramer shook his head. "No, I don't think so. On the contrary, I think your baby is rather special, which is why I wanted to show you these other diaries — and would very much like you to continue in the trial."

Christine put a hand on her bump again, and seemed to give this idea some thought. "No, sorry Dr Kramer, my mind is made up. In fact, after reading those other diaries, I wish that my baby was more like theirs. You've read my diary?"

Dr Kramer nodded, not wishing to interrupt.

"Can you imagine what it's like hearing in advance what's going to happen — both good and bad — but not necessarily in situations that affect me? It seems almost random. It's terrible. I've stopped wearing the device now."

Dr Kramer had read about these predictions in her diary. Each of them had eventually turned out to be true — days or weeks later.

"And it's not just in broken English either. As you can see from my diaries, I get the full details," she said sadly.

"Why did you stop writing it a week ago?" asked Dr Kramer.

Christine didn't answer immediately, but just looked down, again feeling her bump, fondly.

"Was it the same reason that made you want to withdraw from the trial?" Dr Kramer asked, more gently.

When she looked up again, her eyes were watery. "Most of the predictions my baby has made are about other people or events, like someone winning the lottery, or how the weather will change, or even a train accident. But despite the details about the event itself, no location, time or date is ever given. So there's nothing I can do about any of it!" she exclaimed, finally releasing her pent-up frustration.

"I've come to accept this over the past few weeks, but I thought that maybe the other women may have been having similar experiences — until you showed me some of their diaries."

She paused. "But then, about a week ago, my baby predicted that my husband would be in a fatal car accident, again without saying when or where."

She stopped and pulled something out of her handbag. "And then this came — I've written it as it was told to me by my baby."

Dr Kramer took the paper from her and read it. There was an additional request from Christine, written at the end of the message — perhaps she found it difficult to say.

"Are you sure about this?"

She put her hand on her bump again, but nodded, decisively. "It's what she wants." ■

Julian Tang is a clinical/academic virologist, who, perhaps like some other dads, would like to think that his baby may have deeper thoughts than "where is MY MILK? WAAHH!"

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