



# Everyday Ethics

Ultrasound and Sex-determination in  
Australia



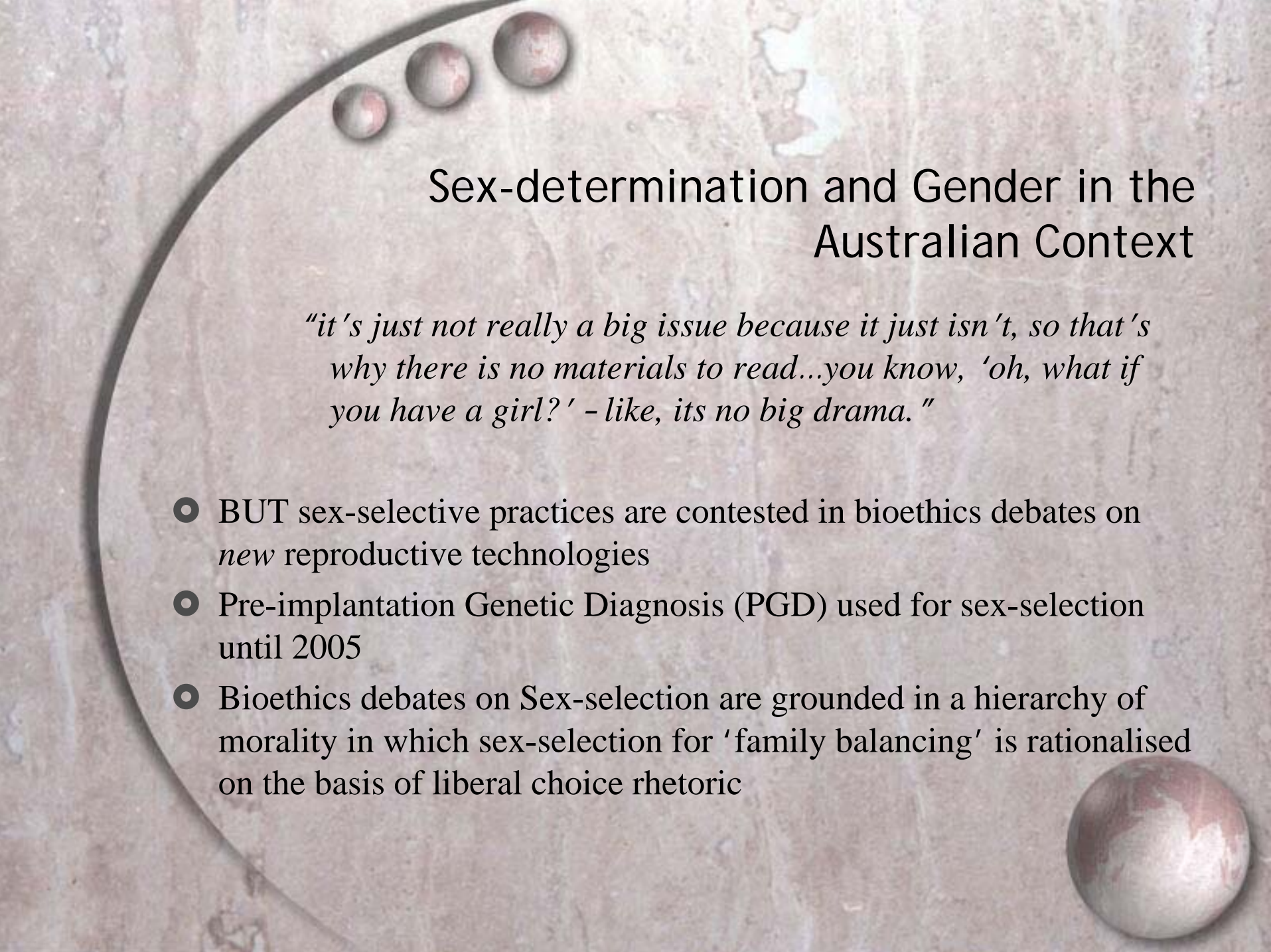


# “everyday ethics”

- ‘ethical conduct’ is more than simply doing the right thing. It involves acting in the right spirit, out of an abiding respect and concern for one’s fellow creatures (National Health and Medical Research Council, Australia)
- the day-to-day clinical activities that constitute a moral territory lying outside of formal ethics guidelines
- Sex-determination and Ultrasound - no formal regulation in Australia - instructive for understanding ‘everyday ethics’ practices

## Role of sonographers during Ultrasound

- Sonographers engage in ‘meaning making’ processes during ultrasound
- ‘meaning-making’ processes: collaborative engagements with patients in which the ultrasound images are personalised
- ‘meaning making’ has potential to enhance the emotional experience of patients during ultrasound and influence desire to know the sex
- Sonographers can temper emotional responses to sex-determination with neutralising strategies




## Sex-determination and Gender in the Australian Context

*"it's just not really a big issue because it just isn't, so that's why there is no materials to read...you know, 'oh, what if you have a girl?' - like, its no big drama."*

- BUT sex-selective practices are contested in bioethics debates on *new* reproductive technologies
- Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD) used for sex-selection until 2005
- Bioethics debates on Sex-selection are grounded in a hierarchy of morality in which sex-selection for 'family balancing' is rationalised on the basis of liberal choice rhetoric



## Ethics, Sex-determination and Ultrasound?

- Why have ethical issues surrounding sex-determination and ultrasound have not merited more attention?
  - Accepted that people just want to know “whether to buy pink and blue”
  - However, explanation of “pink and blue” doesn’t adequately explain the degree of emotion I observed during the practice of sex-determination
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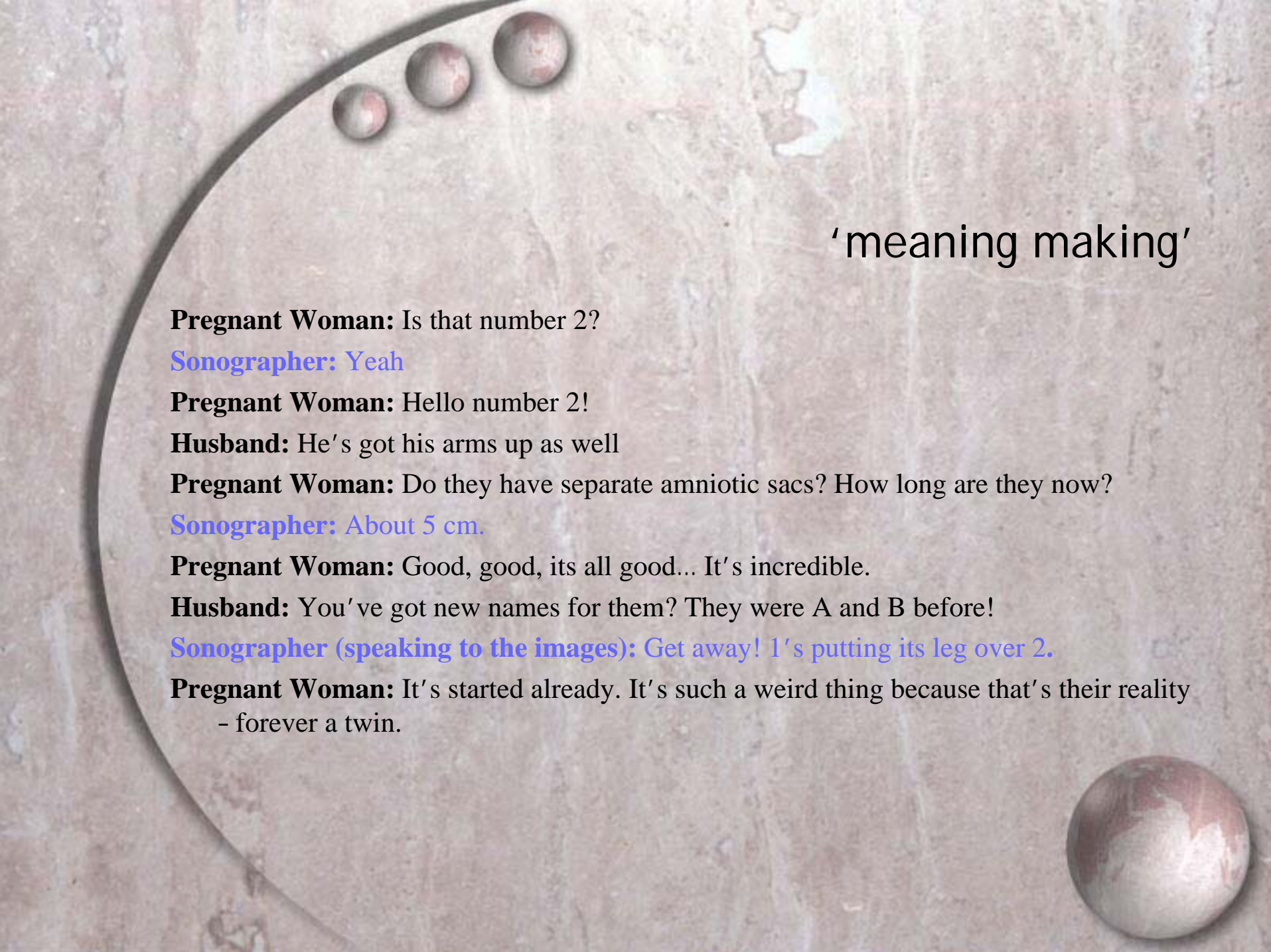
## "Pink and Blue" Emotion

*"I can see why they come, feeling the way they do. And all they want to know is - you know one of the most exciting things is knowing whether it's a boy or a girl or you know, deciding oh, we don't want to know or..."*

*(Interview with sonographer)*

*"There's people who've been really, really happy. And then, other people who've been just absolutely devastated and wouldn't speak to me for the rest of the scan because they expected it to be the other gender. Completely irrational behaviour - but you know, people react differently. And I think that, often people have the expectations, they build themselves up and they think oh yeah, I'm sure this is going to be a girl, I can feel it in my water and I heard the heartbeat the other day. And the Internet told me that you know, if the heartbeat's between 120 and 140 then it has to be female."*

*(Interview with sonographer)*



## 'meaning making'

**Pregnant Woman:** Is that number 2?

**Sonographer:** Yeah

**Pregnant Woman:** Hello number 2!

**Husband:** He's got his arms up as well

**Pregnant Woman:** Do they have separate amniotic sacs? How long are they now?


**Sonographer:** About 5 cm.

**Pregnant Woman:** Good, good, its all good... It's incredible.

**Husband:** You've got new names for them? They were A and B before!

**Sonographer (speaking to the images):** Get away! 1's putting its leg over 2.

**Pregnant Woman:** It's started already. It's such a weird thing because that's their reality  
- forever a twin.



# Sex-determination and 'meaning making'

**Sonographer:** That's the baby's little head.

**Husband:** Where? Ooooooh, yeah

**Sonographer:** We're just going to measure across the baby's head and around it... Just looking inside the brain.

**Husband:** Hello bubba!

**Sonographer:** Just looking at the cerebellum at the back part of the brain, some bits are hard to see (shows the couple the nose and lips)... That's the thigh-bone.

**Pregnant Woman:** Is that to see if there's any deficiencies?

**Sonographer:** No. Just to measure for gestational age.

**Husband:** You can't tell if it's a boy or girl.

**Sonographer:** Are you telling me or asking?

**Husband:** I don't know, I don't know if I want to know. (Turns to his wife) Do you want to know?

**Pregnant woman:** I'm in two minds, as long as it's healthy.

**Husband:** Doesn't matter so long as it's like its dad. Bubba done good.

## meaningful ultrasound images and the decision to learn the sex

*The scan continued for some time and both partners were really emotional. They continued to repeatedly exclaim "wow!"*

**Sonographer:** Oh, see it rockin' and rollin' there. We look quite carefully at the baby's heart because its actually quite small at this stage so we look at major structural abnormalities but you have to realise its not 100% at this stage unfortunately.

*After taking extensive images of the heart, the sonographer showed the face of the baby, prompting an "Oohhh, wow!" from the husband who perked up considerably upon seeing the baby's profile.*

**Sonographer:** Wait. Can you see its little tongue? Look, it's having a drink.

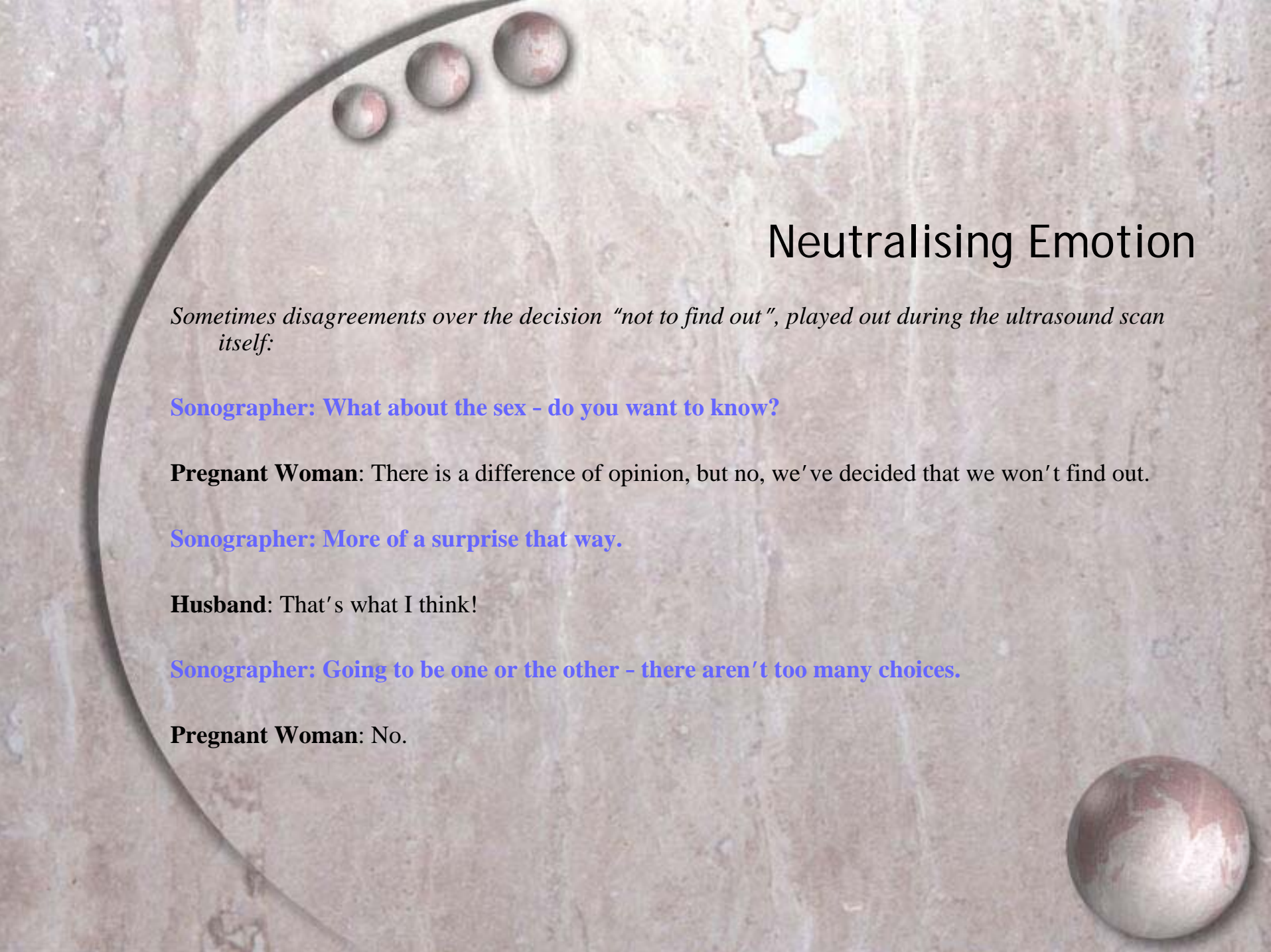
*We watched the baby's profile and it did appear that there was a tongue visibly flickering in and out of its mouth. All of a sudden, the husband seemed to make up his mind about wanting to know the sex:*

**Husband:** I think I want to know if it's a boy or a girl. I think it's a boy.

**Pregnant woman:** I think it's a girl.

**Husband:** I guarantee it's a boy. Let's make a bet... if it's a boy, I'll shout you a trip somewhere. If it's a girl you shout me. A trip to the Greek Islands or something?

*The pregnant woman agrees to the bet and they shake on it.*



# Neutralising Emotion

*Sometimes disagreements over the decision "not to find out", played out during the ultrasound scan itself:*

**Sonographer:** What about the sex - do you want to know?

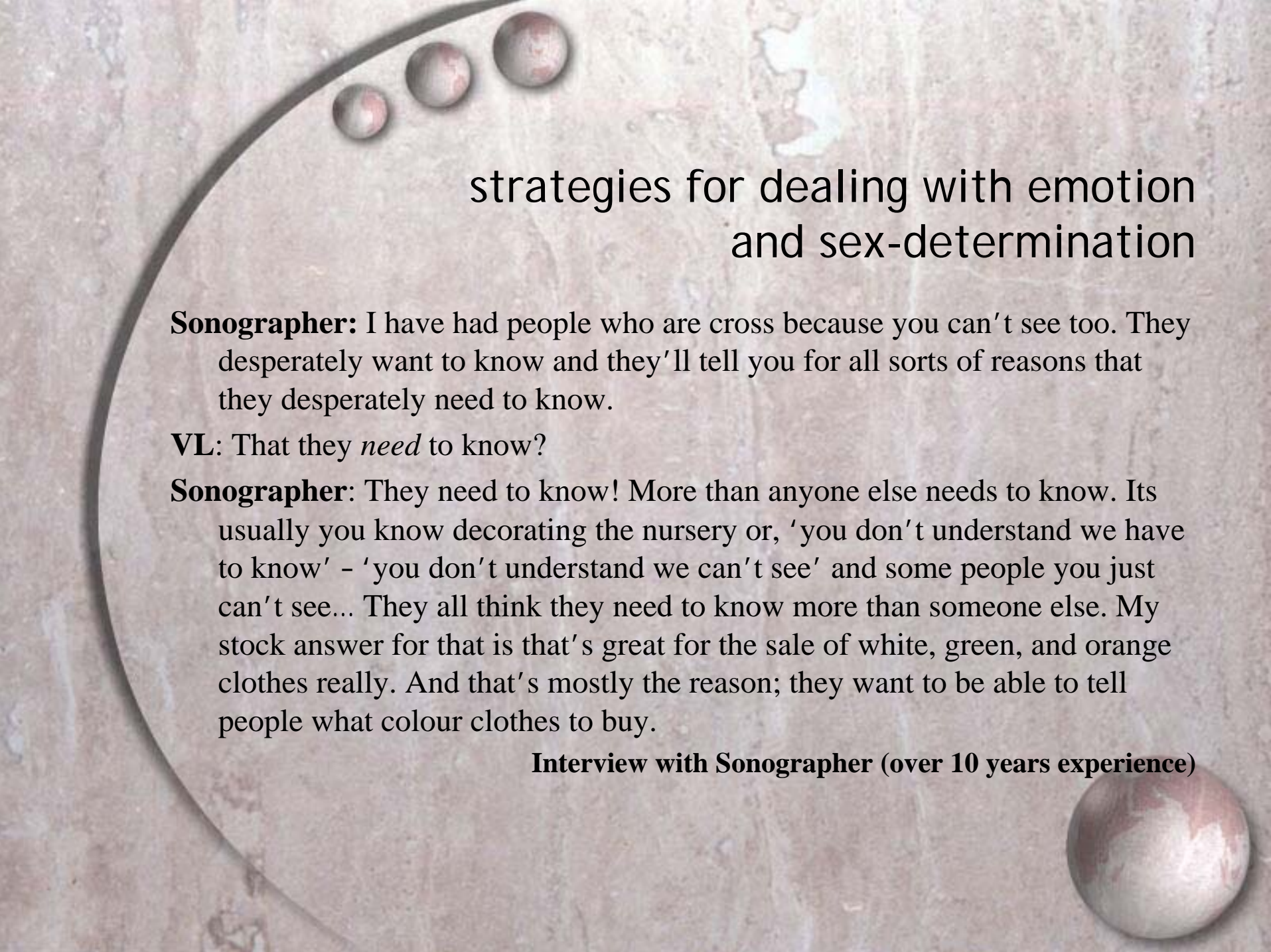
**Pregnant Woman:** There is a difference of opinion, but no, we've decided that we won't find out.

**Sonographer:** More of a surprise that way.

**Husband:** That's what I think!

**Sonographer:** Going to be one or the other - there aren't too many choices.

**Pregnant Woman:** No.



## strategies for dealing with emotion and sex-determination

**Sonographer:** I have had people who are cross because you can't see too. They desperately want to know and they'll tell you for all sorts of reasons that they desperately need to know.

**VL:** That they *need* to know?

**Sonographer:** They need to know! More than anyone else needs to know. Its usually you know decorating the nursery or, 'you don't understand we have to know' - 'you don't understand we can't see' and some people you just can't see... They all think they need to know more than someone else. My stock answer for that is that's great for the sale of white, green, and orange clothes really. And that's mostly the reason; they want to be able to tell people what colour clothes to buy.

**Interview with Sonographer (over 10 years experience)**




## Interview with sonographer (less than 5 years experience)

**Sonographer:** I've had basically every situation you can think of. Patients telling their husbands to walk out of the room while they just want to know, or, you know, or people being disappointed in the room because they found out the sex wasn't what they were expecting, or...

**VL:** How do they show that disappointment?

**Sonographer:** Oh, it's pretty obvious! But um, you know, you just don't comment on anything they say. Or you can actually say to them, and say well look, what I've just told you is not a 100%, so don't make any permanent changes in the house just as yet. But as I said its not 100%, its not 100% accurate, I'm just telling you what I think it might be. And whatever they do with that information is up to them.





## Interview with Sonographer (over 5 years experience)

**VL:** Have you had people get angry with you for not being able to see the sex of the baby?

**Sonographer:** Yep, yep. A lot of people its sort of an expectation. But in that situation I just say as diplomatically as I can, say to them, 'look this is a medical test, we're here to find out any medical problems with your foetus and you know, the gender of your baby is probably the least of, the least important thing we look at in this scan... its much more important having a healthy baby.'

# Conclusion

- Ultrasound and the practices of sex-determination in Australia are unregulated because of cultural assumptions about gender-neutrality, rather than a reasoned argument based on ethical principles.
- 'Gender disappointment' is an issue in Australia and many people have intense emotional investment in the decisions surrounding sex-determination.
- Sonographers play a crucial role in the meanings that people attach to the ultrasound images and 'meaning-making' may contribute to the emotional pull of sex-determination.
- Neutralising strategies constitute a form of "everyday ethics": "pink and blue" serves instead to neutralise the emotional and supposed "irrational" urges that people demonstrate in the context of sex-determination decisions and results.



# Questions??

Is ethical regulation necessary?

Is gender disappointment less ethically problematic when it emanates from a desire for girls or 'family balancing'?

Can "everyday ethics" shape morality?