Breakthrough Discovery May Eventually Enhance Detection Of Genetic Problems In Fetuses.

The Los Angeles Times (12/9, Khan) reports, "Researchers have found a way to collect and decode the complete DNA sequence of a fetus by piecing it together using a sample of its mother's blood." Now, a number of experts believe that the "discovery...could present a safer alternative to the invasive procedures currently used to detect genetic problems in fetuses." The breakthrough detailed in Science Translational Medicine "was made possible after researchers from the Chinese University of Hong Kong found in 1997 that the fetus released DNA into its mother's plasma."

But, "it's hard to distinguish fetal sequences from the larger quantity of a woman's own DNA," New Scientist (12/8, Aldhous) pointed out. Researcher Dennis "Lo has previously worked on methods to detect fetuses with Down's syndrome from floating fetal DNA. Now, through a combination of brute-force DNA sequencing and sophisticated bioinformatics, his team has shown that it should be possible to detect any genetic disease from a sample of a pregnant woman's blood."