Pro/Con Debate: Lumber Ultrasound - Useful Gadget or Time Consuming Gimmick
Con: Reflections on a Sound Wave

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Objective: At the end of this debate the participants will realize that lumbar ultrasound in obstetrics is no more than an expensive, time-consuming gadget, with undetermined risks and uncertain benefits.

Summary: For decades, anesthesiologists have striven to perfect the identification and cannulation of the epidural space using skills learned during training and the early years of practice. These skills include knowledge of the relevant anatomy and the learning of subtle tactile clues that aid successful placement of an epidural catheter. Indeed, obstetric anesthesiologists have managed to do this with great success without using imaging techniques.

There is a long learning curve associated with lumbar ultrasound and it is unclear from the literature if the success rates associated with its use are superior to clinical skill alone.

It should be remembered that the United States spent approximately $2.2 trillion on health care in 2007, or $7,421 per person – nearly twice the average of other developed nations. If rapid health cost growth persists, it has been estimated that by 2025, one out of every four dollars in the US national economy will be tied up in the health system. Do obstetric anesthesiologists want to add to these costs by using unnecessary and expensive equipment?

Although many feel that diagnostic ultrasound in obstetrics is safe, there are some who argue that we have yet to perform an appropriate risk analysis for lumbar ultrasound during pregnancy. The documented side-effects associated with ultrasound use will be reviewed.

Key Points:
1. For decades, anesthesiologists have managed to find the epidural space with great success by using clinical knowledge of anatomy and learned clinical skills.
2. It is unclear if the reported benefits of lumbar ultrasound in obstetrics are superior to clinical skill alone.
3. Lumbar ultrasound in obstetrics may increase the cost of health care and add a significant time burden.
4. The issue of ultrasound biosafety needs to be considered

Key References:
3. www.whitehouse.gov/Issues/health-Care. The President’s Plan