
M.D. TO BE

What is a transvaginal ultrasound, anyway?

By Marianne DiNapoli on March 15, 2012 at 8:42 AM

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This is me learning to perform transvaginal ultrasounds on a dummy.

There has been a lot of controversy lately over the proposed legislation in Virginia to require women seeking an abortion to have a transvaginal ultrasound before the procedure. I had no idea what a transvaginal ultrasound actually was before med school, so I thought I'd share my experience with you all.

Transvaginal ultrasounds are used in early pregnancy, when the fetus is too small to be visualized with a traditional over-the-belly ultrasound machine. The ultrasound probe is inserted all the way into the patient's vagina until the tip of the probe reaches the uterus.

Transvaginal ultrasounds are so common in the Emergency Room, we had a workshop to learn to properly perform them (you can see me learning on a creepily dismembered female dummy above). For example, if a woman in her first trimester of pregnancy comes to the ER for vaginal bleeding, the possibility of a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy (which has implanted outside the womb) must be assessed with the transvaginal probe. If a fetus is not seen in the uterus, but a woman has a positive urine pregnancy test, the transvaginal ultrasound can be a truly life-saving test.

That being said, transvaginal ultrasounds are extremely invasive – just check out the enormous probe in the the picture. I have performed them on real patients during this rotation, and they can be very painful. I cannot imagine performing one on a patient who didn't really need it. Thankfully, the bill in Virginia was amended so that transvaginal ultrasounds are no longer required before an abortion (only the regular abdominal ones are). Unfortunately, Texas still has a law mandating the transvaginal ultrasound be performed, whether or not the physician and patient deem it medically necessary. As a future OB/GYN, I wish the government would start trusting women with their doctors to make the right decision about their health and their bodies.