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News

Ultrasound studios await Rell decision

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By Ed Stannard, Register Metro Editor

Anne Jones of Guilford says her daughter was anxious about her pregnancy until she met Kim Karbowski, owner of What's Kickin' ultrasound studio.

"She's been nervous through the whole pregnancy," Jones said of her daughter, Kelly Mervine of Cranston, R.I. "Kim was able to say, 'Here's your baby, and here are the arms and here's the legs.'"

Karbowski opened the studio in November 2008 at 2346 Boston Post Road in Guilford. She and her husband, expecting a baby of their own, sank their savings into the business. She says she offers a way for families to bond with their babies while still in the womb, and to have detailed photos and video to keep.

So-called "entertainment ultrasound" businesses like What's Kickin' bring joy to some parents-to-be and their families, but a bill recently passed by the General Assembly may make it difficult for owners to keep their doors open.

The bill would prohibit obstetrical ultrasounds unless they are "ordered by a licensed health care provider" and "for a medical or diagnostic purpose."

The law would take effect July 1, if Gov. M. Jodi Rell signs it. Her office said Tuesday the bill hadn't reached her desk, and that she wouldn't decide whether to sign it until she has considered it.

Karbowski believes the prohibition is unnecessary, that she's a trained sonographer — she teaches sonography at Yale-New Haven Hospital — who offers a welcome service.

"These people get to bring in their whole entire family," she says. "They get to bring in the godparents." She says she feels unfairly targeted because of stories about other such studios whose owners don't have the training she does.

"I am a certified technologist," says Karbowski, who gave birth to a son, Jacob, four weeks ago. "This is what I do for a living. I've actually trained the technologists who work for these doctors who are against this."

Karbowski charges \$165 for a package that includes a DVD of the entire scan, a CD with up to 10 3-D sonograms, three sheets of photos, a personal Web page and a package of gifts from retailers, such as formula samples and water bottles.

Her studio also is a boutique with books, T-shirts and cute baby stuff, as well as Queasy Drops for mom. Photos of babies on the walls and soft couches give it a relaxing air.

The problem, says state Rep. Deborah Heinrich, D-Madison, who introduced the bill, is that ultrasound is a medical procedure with risk, and as such shouldn't be used for entertainment.

"Like other medical procedures, ultrasound comes with risk, and this is something that they acknowledge as well, and the medical profession feels strongly, as do I, that you should do medical procedures that come with risk for as little time as possible and only when medically necessary," said Heinrich, who is a childbirth educator.

Heinrich said that since the businesses are unregulated, there's no way to know whether the operator is properly trained or whether the equipment is maintained and calibrated to keep sound waves at a safe level.

"One of the providers told us that he had a seven-day training, where three days were on how to run the business and four days on how to run the ultrasound," Heinrich said, referring to a hearing the Public Health Committee held for business owners.

Concerning safety, Heinrich said, "It is a given that there is risk. It is accepted by the medical community and it is accepted by people doing the procedure."

Dr. Joshua Copel of Guilford, a professor at the Yale School of Medicine and past president of the American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine, said the safety issue is not clear-cut, but that there is potential for harm if sound waves are too intense. High-level ultrasound, for example, is used to break up kidney stones.

He acknowledged that "there are no independent replicated studies that show harm to the fetus."

Copel said the service isn't even needed, that parents can get the same photos from their obstetrician.

"All of our equipment is capable of creating 3-D images," he said, and his office will give the patients photos and videos. "We do it because the patient's there anyway and they like it."

Gina Beaudoin, owner of A Tiny Perspective in Glastonbury, said she's always required a form from the client to say a doctor has already done a medical ultrasound. Karbowski does the same. Beaudoin said she thinks she can survive if the client has an order from her doctor ordering the scan.

Karbowski said the bill was proposed before anyone talked to business owners and that she got three days' notice of a meeting set up after the public hearing. She wishes Heinrich and others had worked with her to come up with a solution, creating sensible regulations.

"They're not too worried about putting me out of business and having me go broke," she said. "Regulate me. I don't know why they won't work with me."

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