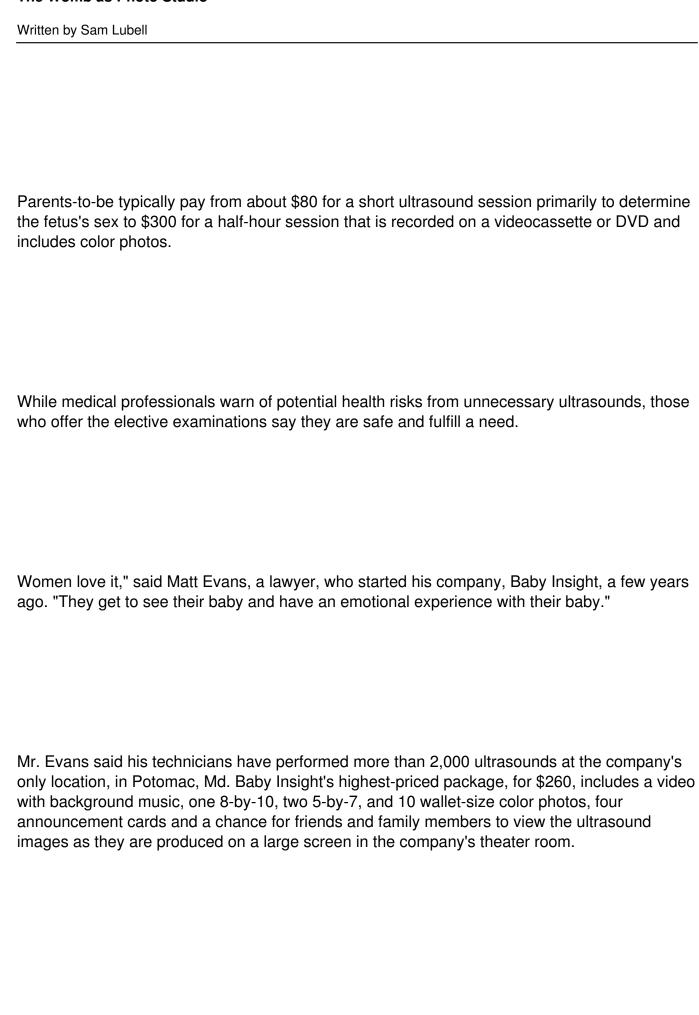
It's a rite of passage for many expectant parents: baby's first ultrasound. The fuzzy images of the fetus, produced during an examination in an obstetrician's office, are prized by couples, passed around proudly among friends and relatives.

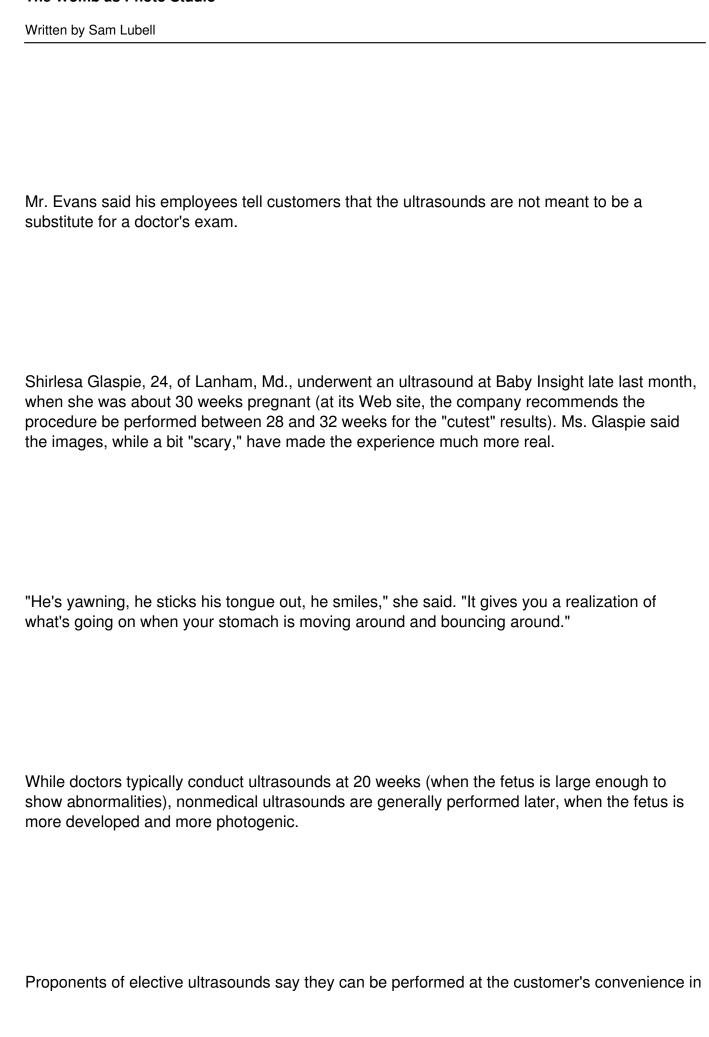




Now, trying to capitalize on this phenomenon, a number of companies are selling elective ultrasounds that have little to do with neonatal health. The services, often in small offices or shopping malls, amount to fetal photo studios and use newer 3-D ultrasound technology to produce more realistic images than conventional machines.

The Womb as Photo Studio





a relaxed atmosphere, and more frequently employ 3-D machines, which are not as useful for observing internal organs for diagnostic purposes but are excellent at capturing realistic still or video images of the face and body.

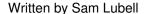
"As the technology improves, more and more women will be wanting to see it," said Mr. Evans, who has plans to open 75 more centers nationwide by the end of 2005. "That's why we're trying to get in while the market is still undeveloped."

He has plenty of competition. Other companies offering the services include Peek-a-Boo Ultrasounds in California; Womb With a View in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Texas; FetalFotos in Georgia; and Prenatal Peek, which has branches in North Carolina, South Carolina and California and is opening another in Hawaii, according to its Web site.



Many companies buy new or used medical equipment made by companies like General

The Womb as Photo Studio



Electric, Siemens, Philips and Medison. Prices range from around \$25,000 to more than \$150,000.

Mr. Evans said he bought his used GE Voluson 730 from a national distributor, for \$75,000. He would not name the company, in part, he acknowledged, because he feared that the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates medical equipment, might crack down on distributors.

Some doctors and federal regulators think ultrasounds performed outside the medical establishment may pose health risks. The American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine, a professional group, and the Food and Drug Administration have strongly opposed elective ultrasounds, saying that unnecessary exposure to high-frequency sound waves could be unhealthy.



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