The History of Abortion

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Abortion as a Universal Phenomenon

“There is every indication that abortion is an absolutely universal phenomenon, and that it is impossible even to construct an imaginary social system in which no woman would ever feel at least compelled to abort.”

Devereux, A typological study of abortion in 350 primitive, ancient and pre-industrial societies, 1954.
Early References to Abortion

Specific (non-critical) references to abortion

• One of earliest known medical texts, attributed to the Chinese emperor, Shen Nung, 2737-2698 B.C.
• Ebers Papyrus of Egypt, 1550 B.C.-1500 B.C.
• Various writers of Roman Empire: Ovid, Juvenal, Seneca, (1st century B.C., 1st and 2nd centuries A.D.)
• Al-Rasi, Persian physician, 10th century

Hippocrates and Abortion

What did his oath actually say?

• Translation A: “Neither will I give a woman means to procure an abortion.”

• Translation B: “Neither will I give a suppository to cause an abortion.”
  – i.e. Hippocrates only opposing one method of abortion

Evidence supporting Translation B:

“Works ascribed to Hippocrates describe a graduated set of dilators that could be used for abortions.”


1950s and Beyond

Gradual liberalization

• China, most European countries; U.S. and Canada, India, S. Africa, Mexico City, Colombia
• “menstrual extraction clinics” in Bangladesh and elsewhere
1950s and Beyond

Gradual improvement in technology

- vacuum aspiration
  - introduced in U.S. and W. Europe in 1960s
  - in many places, replaces D&C
  - manual vacuum aspirator
- medication abortion
  - mifepristone (France, 1988)
  - methotrexate
  - misoprostol
Abortion in the U.S. Before Legalization

An unregulated environment before mid-19th century

- many ads in newspapers
- promising “to bring down the menses”
- use of herbs
- many categories of providers, including midwives
Abortion in the U.S. Before Legalization

Role of organized medicine

• AMA (founded in 1847) leads a campaign to criminalize abortion
  – the Catholic Church is a secondary player

• primary motivation of AMA?
  – a key component of a larger battle under way: a professionalization drive of university-trained physicians
The “Century of Criminalization” 1873-1973

How much abortion? Over a million?

Who provided?
• “Doctors of conscience”
• Unsafe abortion in the “back-alley”
• Self abortion

Results?
• Deaths and injuries
• 5000 deaths?
Mobilizing for Legalization

Jane Hodgson, M.D.

- Convicted and lost her medical license in 1970 for openly performing an in-hospital abortion on a patient with rubella
- While waiting for her conviction to be overturned, Dr. Hodgson became medical director of the Preterm clinic in Washington, D.C., where abortion was legal
- Wrote some of the first papers on the safety of abortion, drawing on a large population of patients
Mobilizing for Abortion

The “San Francisco Nine”

“….nine highly respected obstetricians/gynecologists in San Francisco were abruptly threatened with the loss of their licenses because they had been performing hospital-based abortions on women infected with rubella….The case drew national media attention and an unprecedented show of support from influential physicians across the country; more than one hundred deans of medical schools protested this prosecution. Ultimately, the charges against these physicians were dropped.”

Joffe, Doctors of Conscience, 1996.
What happens when a country legalizes abortion?

United States:

“Roe v. Wade transformed abortion from an unsafe, clandestine procedure to one performed under safe, medical conditions. The 1970s thus saw a reduction in abortion-related complications and deaths as safer options became available to American women choosing to terminate an unplanned pregnancy.”

What happens when abortion is criminalized?

Romania:

“For more than two decades, contraception and abortions were strictly forbidden by Mr. Ceausescu in an attempt to build his country into a colossus through population growth. His government was overthrown in 1989, and one of its legacies was **orphanages filled with unwanted and neglected children**.

Another legacy, for Romania's women, was abortion. Some **10,000 women are believed to have died from complications of illegal abortions**, and many more were permanently maimed.”

*NY Times, Nov. 21, 1996.*