

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.”

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.”

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.”