

50p.c. increase in number of legal abortions

LEGAL abortions performed here doubled in the first six months of last year, pushing the number of those receiving abortions from January 1974 to July last year to more than 1050, according to the Medical and Health Department.

Revised government statistics now show that 295 government and 277 private hospital abortions were performed in 1974, while by July last year 268 government and 228 private hospital abortion operations had taken place.

Hongkong's four-year-old liberalised abortion regulations come up for review this March when debate on the controversial issue will be held in the Legislative Council.

At least three major government departments, the Colonial Secretariat, the Home Affairs, and the Medical and Health Departments have reached an advanced stage in their review the present abortion

law and a recommendation is expected to be submitted to the Executive Council soon.

According to the present law, an abortion can be performed providing two doctors decide in good faith that the continuation of pregnancy would be more harmful, mentally or physically, to the woman's health than an abortion.

In the September issue of International Family Planning Digest, legal abortion performed during the first three months of pregnancy is shown to be seven times safer than routine childbirth; three times safer than tonsillectomy.

Out of 100,000 operations, the death rate due to abortion was 1.7, while the death rate for childbirth was 14.1 and for tonsillectomy, 5.0, according to the journal.

"These statistics make it necessary for us to re-examine our abortion law. In any case, it is safer to have a hospital abortion than a nine-month pregnancy," said a prominent government physician recently.

"The government figures, with nearly equal

numbers receiving abortions in the government and private hospitals, show that the private hospitals are doing very well with lucrative abortion cases while government hospitals are barely scratching the surface," another physician commented.

Many physicians estimate that hundreds of women still seek illegal abortions, bypassing the significantly cheaper government abortion, because of the red tape involved.

"I can get my patient in and out of, say Lady Matilda Hospital, in little to no time. The hospital costs there are \$750," explained one physician.

"But if that patient can't afford the private hospital and I refer her to a government hospital, she has to spend days, sometimes, in interviews and queues and there's really nothing I as a private physician can do about it," he said.

Hongkong's present abortion legislation dates to 1972 when it was instituted for a two-year period. Considerable public debate accompanied the law's proposed renewal in 1974, with sharp criticism of the legislation applied by local religious groups who equate abortion with murder.

A survey of local gynaecologists started several months ago by the Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology will be released shortly before the March review.

Sources close to this report say that most local gynaecologists either favour or sympathise with some form of legalised abortion.

"I know one private-practice doctor in Central who personally opposes the abortion operation. Still, he will make referrals to those doctors who will do abortions because he says the woman is going to get the operation somehow whether he helps her or not," said a local pharmacist recently.

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