

Abortion: Need for counselling

THE ABORTION question calls for an inter-disciplinary approach. With the collaboration of a group of doctors, lawyers, social workers and other persons the Birthright Society has been making a study of the subject. We offer our thoughts in a spirit of sincere dialogue with those whose views may happen to differ from our own.

Our conclusion to the question "When does human life begin?" is that life is a continuing process of development which begins with the union of sperm and ovum, each with its genetic contribution, which results in the formation of a unique individual.

Since the earliest tests confirming pregnancy require that a woman will have passed her expected menstrual date by 10-14 days, therefore the embryo would be 24-28 days old with differentiation of its head, early muscle cells and a beating heart. This is clearly not the equivalent of a "blob of meat" as some would like us to believe, but a life worthy of respect and protection.

Looking into the proposed reasons for abortion we find that these can be grouped into two broad categories: medical and social.

On the medical aspects, without entering into a technical debate, we feel that there is ample evidence that with the present state of the art and science of medicine there are adequate medical alternatives to abortion.

Further there is medical evidence that abortion under the best of conditions can be prejudicial to the woman's future health and capability of bearing healthy children: (see the Wynn Reports on "Some Consequences of Induced Abortion to Children Born Subsequently").

For this and other reasons we feel that every woman should obtain adequate counselling before an abortion decision, with the assurance of assistance if she decides to bear the child, whether she eventually keeps it or relinquishes it for adoption.

The fact that the pregnancy is the result of incest or rape only makes the need for counselling more imperative. Fortunately, there is evidence that pregnancies resulting from rape are rare: a study of 3,500 cases of rape treated in hospitals in the Minneapolis - St Paul area, US, over a 10-year period revealed no cases of rape resulting in pregnancy.

In the social area, the problems require a concerted effort to solve. The unwed mother may find herself in particular need of housing assistance and medical care designed to protect and enhance her dignity as a human being and to obviate the social

stigma involved. The married mother may find herself in no smaller plight. Her difficulty may revolve around the family finances.

Sometimes it lies in the interpersonal relationship of husband and wife, one or both involved in irresponsible behaviour such as gambling, excessive drinking, drug taking, etc.

The Birthright Society is committed, within the limits of its modest resources, to helping both wed and unwed mothers, by making available to those in real need pre-natal and post-natal care, counselling and other services. Much remains to be done, especially in the field of family life education. We support the principle of responsible parenthood and believe that there are reliable methods of limiting the size of the family compatible with every religious belief.

On the legal aspects, we believe that the present law has not succeeded in its

declared objective of clarifying the Common Law whilst introducing safeguards.

In particular, Section 47A of the Offences Against the Person Ordinance does not make it clear whether the test laid down for "medical terminations" can be satisfied in a case where the only risks involved are ordinary risks inseparable from normal childbearing.

Further, we do not have the equivalent of the British Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 which continues to protect children capable of being born alive. We do not believe that this lacuna in our law is due to any policy decision reached by Government that a viable foetus in Hongkong should be accorded less protection than a viable foetus in Britain.

D. CHANG
Vice-Chairman,
Society for the Protection
of Birthright