

# 8,648 choose legal abortion

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fourth group of eligibility: where the mother-to-be is over 40.

"We did think about the upper end of the fertile age group but while the chances of a woman over 40 giving birth to a baby with Downes syndrome or a mentally handicapped child was substantially higher, the actual incidence was just one or two per cent.

"So while this possibility was discussed internally it was rejected on the grounds that medically speaking it did not make all that much of a strong case," Mr Ho said.

Although the Bill has come under strong attack from a vociferous section of the community, Mr Ho said he was "fairly confident that the proposals will have the overwhelming support of the community.

"The Chinese press comments are almost invariably favourable and in fact there have been calls that we should take into account economic considerations as well but we don't think we should."

Studies have shown that while only about two-thirds or 123 of the 184 women who were given abortions in 1973 were Chinese the number has now risen to 6,870 of last year's 7,150 cases or 96.1 per cent.

"The number of Chinese women being given abortions is now closer to the proportion of Chinese in the community.

"It is not yet 98 per cent but if the number of Chinese women taking advantage of the facility was markedly less than the overall population it would give cause for wondering," said Mr Ho.

The Bill represents "a balanced package and not a charter for abortion as some people seem to think.

"It was never our intention to open the door completely but merely to make abortions available within defined circumstances that are therapeutic."

Explaining the thinking behind the Bill, Mr Ho said: "We thought it was timely to review the provisions of the ordinance and it was felt that certain marginal liberalisation was deserved.

"Given that the Government has no intention of making abortions available on demand and it is not our policy to use abortion as a means of birth control there was a feeling that in certain circumstances it was desirable from the social point of view to make it easier for a woman desiring an abortion to get one."

A breakdown of the cases of legal abortions carried out between 1973 and last year indicates that the woman most likely to seek the operation is married and between the ages of 20 and 39.

Single women account for only 16.1 per cent of the cases compared with 82.1 per cent who were married.

Only 4.4 per cent or 899 abortions were performed on women below the age of 20 while 49.2 per cent of the cases were between 20 to 29 years old, another 35 per cent were in the 30 to 39 age group, 9.6 per cent were in the 40 and over age group and the ages of 1.8 per cent of the women were not known.

A breakdown of the socio-economic status of people who got abortions during the seven-year period from 1973 showed that 28.4 per cent were office workers, 23 per cent were skilled workers, another 30.3 per cent were from a miscellaneous group that included housewives and semi-skilled workers.

Only 4.4 per cent were professional women and 13.9 per cent were executives, Mr Ho said.

Although the number of young women seeking abortions is comparatively small, Mr Ho believes there is a case for allowing a woman under 17 to have an abortion.

"I have no basis for commenting on this figure but the fact that women under 20 make up only 4.4 per cent of the cases may be accounted for by more people turning to back-street abortionists.

"At this tender age it is less likely that they will be able to sit down rationally to review the situation and it is more likely that they will charge off to the first back-street abortionist they can

find," he said.

In introducing this new criteria, the Government's main concern was that girls of this age were not really ready for motherhood, Mr Ho added.

As for the question of legalised abortion for presumed handicapped children, he stressed that the economic factor did not figure largely in the Government's consideration.

"It is not the Government's intention to control the number of handicapped children born.

"Naturally every handicapped child has a need for special services but the Government fully accepts its commitment in this regard and if parents are prepared to take the risk there is nothing to stop them.

"However there is nothing more tragic than to see an unwanted handicapped child and where parents feel they cannot bear the thought of this possibility I think our society should recognise this and the mother allowed therapeutic abortion," Mr Ho said.

The Government has no record of how many babies are born handicapped.

There is, however, a guesstimate which puts the number at about 15 handicapped babies per 10,000 births, he said.

Based on the figure of 61,787 registered births in the first nine months of the year this works out to about 96 handicapped children.

"But there are many more who become disabled in the course of life," Mr Ho noted.