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LEGCO DECISION TO END A YEAR OF PUBLIC DEBATE

Abortion: Now it's up to councillors

ALMOST a year of raging public debate will reach a climax today when the Legislative Council votes on proposed changes to Hongkong's Abortion Bill.

On the eve of the final debate, supporters and opponents of the Bill stood their ground.

For the opposition, secretary of the Action Group on Abortion Therese Howard said, "We feel that the Bill will go through. The recent amendment is a preferable situation to the first proposals.

"But there are parts of it we're not happy with, particularly the legislation on abortion of the handicapped."

In principal, the group is against all proposals to relax the abortion laws.

Dr Edith Horsfall spoke in support of the bill purely on practical grounds. She said that by specifying categories underneath the "broad umbrella" of risk to physical and mental health, the actual business of getting an abortion might be speeded up.

"The whole idea about abortions is to do them as early as possible. You want to try to do them before ten weeks, because every week you delay you're adding just a tiny fraction of risk," Dr Horsfall said.

In what she regarded as the real crux of the issue she lashed out at the lack of facilities available for abortion.

"What you need is a place where everybody can go and be seen immediately, processed immediately, the decision made immediately, without having to queue up," she said.

Government hospitals do not provide special facilities for patients seeking abortions. "You may have to wait several weeks before you're seen for the first time," she said.

"If you have a fairly liberal law, you should have

The Bill in brief

THE proposed Bill provides that:

- Abortion be legal if there is substantial risk the child will be seriously handicapped.
- The legal age for abortion be lowered from 17 years to 16 years (under the ordinance it is an offence to have sexual intercourse with a girl under 16).
- Abortion should be available for victims of forced intercourse such as rape or incest, providing they report the offence to the police within three months and have medical grounds for an abortion.
- That no pregnancy of more than 24 weeks duration can be terminated (at present there is no time limit).

Current legislation allows abortion if two doctors certify that a woman would risk her life or cause herself physical or mental injury by continuing the pregnancy.

the back-up services to execute it."

On the key issue of abortion for handicapped children, Dr Horsfall said, "I only see a moral dilemma in what the woman feels herself.

"She must be given the facts by her doctor and make her choice. I think of two miserable alternatives, she's got to weigh up which is the more miserable, that's all."

On the question of rape, it had been proposed by the "opposition" that pregnancy in such cases was extremely rare.

However, Dr Horsfall said that in a well-documented calamity in Bangladesh, 200,000 women were raped by Pakistani soldiers, and 25,000 of them became pregnant.

She said that rape victims were a group who should be protected under the ordinance, even though the general clause relating to mental health certainly covered such cases.

The proposed amendment allows a victim of rape or incest to have an abortion if she has reported the crime to the police within three months, and if

her doctor approves on medical grounds.

On the lowering of the age for legal abortions from 17 to 16, Dr Horsfall said it was good in that it gave legal reassurance to the doctor who might have doubts about allowing a 16 or 17 year old to sign her own consent form.

With the present legislation, a doctor would often insist on parental consent, which could send the girl scuttling off to the nearest backstreet doctor.

The Action Group on Abortion's strong and continuous attack on the original amendments provoked several compromises. But on the issue of aborting children suspected of physical or mental abnormalities, Miss Howard says the group may continue to lobby after today's vote if the move is passed.

"There is no legal situation for any sort of testing or expert evaluation. This is what we're looking for - the realisation that you can't just say 'I think that because this lady is 40 she is liable to have a mongoloid child. We won't do any sort of testing, we'll just abort her'."

"And actually 98 times out of 100 the child will be probably not mongoloid."

Miss Howard argued that there was no way of assessing the exact degree of handicap, and that tests cannot be made in any case until the 16th week of pregnancy, by which time the risks of abortion have begun to multiply.

"I think we are basically against the aborting the handicapped. The rationale we are using is that this situation doesn't allow any expert assessment or accurate diagnosis."

On moral grounds, she said the group equated abortion of the handicapped foetus with infanticide, which she said had been found to be widespread in some hospitals, where doctors overseded severely deformed babies.

"We feel that this sort of legislation is the wedge," she said, and added "I think it will affect the attitude of society to providing facilities for the handicapped in future.

"It's very likely to happen. Well, people will say, 'this child's mongoloid, why didn't she have her tests, why didn't she have an abortion, why are you coming into society and asking for a disability allowance and special services?'"

"I think that societal pressure in favour of abortion will give people less and less of an ability to make a free decision."

Miss Howard said that the group had yet to decide whether to keep working after the bill had been voted upon, but saw its role as one of informing the public on the issues and making representation to the Government.

"Most of us are against abortion, but we try to be very cerebral about it. We try to back it up with scientific fact."

"I think we'll probably continue to work along the lines of educating people about the hazards of abortion and the alternatives. There are many people in Hongkong who are willing to adopt babies.

"We want to see a caring society," said Miss Howard.