

40 Years of Religious Support for Reproductive Freedom  
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I want to talk to you about the 1960s. Not the hippies, not Vietnam, not the assassinations or the free love or the drug culture. I want to tell you a story that few people care to remember. The story of abortion. I am 49 years old so even I was quite young in the 60s. I have had people my age make comments to me like “well, of course, before 1973, there were no abortions”. This ignorance astounds me.

Let me tell you right off that most of the medical and research information that I am citing is taken from an excellent book simply titled “Abortion” written by Lawrence Lader and published in 1966. It is out of print.

The 1958 Kinsey study on women reported that among married 16-20 year olds (yes, married), 28% of all pregnancies ended in abortion. Among separated, divorced, and widowed women of all ages, the rate was 79%. Two other studies conducted in the 1950s by women’s health clinics and organizations arrived at estimates of 1,100,000 and 1,500,000 abortions per year, or one abortion for every 3-4 live births. Since the vast majority of these abortions were illegal and the statistics were based upon self-reporting, one must assume that the numbers were low. There would be no reason for this many women to have admitted to illegal activity were it not true.

Just as it is difficult to report accurately the number of abortions during the 50s and 60s, it is equally difficult to report the number of deaths from illegal abortions. Coroners might list the cause of death as “infection”, “miscarriage” or “childbirth”. Hospitals did not choose to expose grieving families to humiliation or to the scrutiny of law enforcement officials. One study in California in the early 1960s estimated between 5,000 and 10,000 abortion deaths annually.

Before 1973, there were six ways to get an abortion.

- 1) First there were the unskilled abortionists. These were the charlatans with no medical training, those we refer to today as “back alley butchers”. They used no anesthetics, no sterilization, no antibiotics. A friend of mine told me that she went to one of these and ended up in

a hospital with a severe infection that scarred her uterus for life. She nearly died. While in the hospital she was interrogated and threatened by police.

- 2) Secondly, there were the skilled abortionists. Well-loved community doctors who knowingly broke the law to provide their patients the best possible care. These doctors were often protected by their local law enforcement, whose wives and daughters had been helped when they needed it.
- 3) Thirdly, there were women's groups that sprung up. Midwives taught other women how to induce early abortion with a soap solution and suction. There was an extensive underground system of these groups. Although relatively safe, they were not without their casualties.
- 4) Fourthly, there was self-induced abortion, perhaps the most common of all. Women often tried self-inducement before turning to other people. Often not fully understanding their own anatomy because they'd never had sex education, they used wire coat hangers and other long sharp objects to try to pierce the womb and start bleeding. They used bleach or lye solutions poured into their vaginas. They deliberately fell down a flight of stairs or tried excessive physical exertion.
- 5) These four ways were all illegal. The fifth way was the only legal way to get an abortion in the United States. The pregnant woman would have to apply to a hospital through her doctor. In most cases the hospital board would review her case and would have to be convinced that she required an abortion to save her life (essentially the same law that was passed in South Dakota and is in the Missouri legislature now). In some states, if the woman could convince the doctor that she was mentally ill and an unfit mother, her application would be approved. You can see where that option wouldn't be a wise one for a woman who already had several children. Sometimes, when hospitals did approve an abortion, the word got out, and pressure from the media, religious officials, and the public caused the hospital to reverse its decision and deny the abortion.
- 6) The sixth way was only for rich women: travel to Sweden or Japan or some other nation where the abortion laws were more liberal.

We also need to keep in mind that birth control pills were still fairly new in those days, available in some states only with the husband's approval (as Sam Alito said he agreed with in a Pennsylvania case), and not available in some places where pharmacists lectured women about the immorality of

taking the pill (as we are hearing repeated in pharmacies throughout Missouri today and as laws currently in our legislature seek to allow). The message to women was very simple: they should never have sex outside of marriage, and if married, they should want to bear as many children as God chose to give them. I hear this exact message coming from the mouths of young college students today.

Back in the 60s, most hospitals had a special ward on their ob/gyn floors. The ward was for women who were suffering from the injuries sustained during abortion. Many of these injuries were self-inflicted; more were the result of illegal abortions performed by persons without any medical license, without proper or sterilized surgical equipment, without anesthetics, without antibiotics. Most of these were young mothers who already had several children. Many had begged their doctors for birth control prescriptions or even sterilization, but the doctors wouldn't hear of it.

40 years later, no such wards exist, and we have forgotten that it ever happened.

That's the medical side, but what about the religious? In the 1960's, clergy saw the injury and death being suffered by women undergoing illegal abortions. They were called upon to do funerals. They went to hospital bedsides. They heard horror stories in their private offices. Clergy became convinced of their own moral responsibility to help women locate safe abortion providers.

Forty years ago, in 1967, the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion was organized at Judson Memorial Church in New York City. Ministers and rabbis saved women's lives by referring them to safe doctors. In 1970, it was a group of clergy who opened the first free-standing abortion clinic in New York City. Many religious organizations in the 60's and early 70's proclaimed their support for a woman's right to choose abortion, including the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1963, the Jewish National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods in 1965, the Division of Social Ministries of the American Baptist Churches in 1968, the Southern Baptist Convention in 1971, and the United Presbyterian Church USA in 1972. Many of them lobbied for the legalization of abortion. They consistently pointed out that where religions disagree, no one religious view should be legislated.

By 1973, when the Supreme Court handed down its landmark abortion decision, Roe V. Wade, at least 20 national religious organizations had either expressed support for the liberalization of abortion laws or indicated that they viewed abortion as a matter of personal choice. But they knew that this did not end the struggle. They founded the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights in that same year. RCAR was assumed to be a short-term coalition, whose intent was to defeat a proposed constitutional amendment to outlaw abortion. The founders would have been dismayed had they known we would be in the same struggles 35 years later.

Today's anti-abortion groups want us to forget this history. They want the public to believe that all religious groups are anti-abortion and always have been. They want to convince the public that if abortion is made illegal, then it will stop. In fact, if abortion becomes illegal, women will die. Today, legal abortion is 11 times safer than childbirth, and less than 1% of women who have an abortion experience complications.

If Roe is overturned, all of those scenarios will be repeated. Desperate women will not refrain from abortion. What will happen to them? Let me read a quote from a medical worker:

“Most commonly, they ingest a whole bottle of quinine pills, with castor oil...we try to get them to the ER before their cardiac rhythm is interrupted...Sometimes they douche with very caustic products like bleach. We had a patient, a teen, who burned herself so badly with bleach that we couldn't even examine her, her vaginal tissue was so painful...”

Our local hospital tells me they see 12-20 patients per year, who have already self-induced or had illegal abortions. Some make it, some don't. They are underage or poor women mostly...”

What year were these words spoken? Not 1966. The date was January, 2006. I don't know whether to say “the future is here” or “the past is here”. The woman speaking those words is named Jen, and she is an administrator in a health clinic that provides legal abortions in the South. The increase in illegal abortion in her area is so significant that a hospital doctor contacted her asking for her help in setting up a special ward for the treatment of illegal abortions when Roe is overturned. He didn't say “IF” he said “when”.

We know that when Roe is overturned, these scenarios will multiply. In addition, we can expect the following:

- 1) Teen girls will be sent away to maternity homes to avoid embarrassing their families. Their parents will pressure them into placing their children for adoption.
- 2) Orphanages will return.
- 3) The cost of abortion will skyrocket, whether legal or illegal.
- 4) Doctors in some states will be jailed.
- 5) Poor women will be offered incentives for sterilization.
- 6) Infants with severe genetic disorders will be born only to die in the first few days or weeks of life.
- 7) Pharmacies will ask for ID/parental permission (this is currently in the Missouri legislature)/marriage license/or husband's permission in order to fill a prescription for birth control.

But I want to point out the major difference between how women got illegal abortions in the 60s and how they will get them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Think a moment, if you are a young woman and you're pregnant, and you want an abortion but don't know how to get one, where will you turn? Straight to the internet. I tried it and this is what I found:

- 1) Extensive descriptions for herbal products that their proponents say will induce abortion.
- 2) Descriptions of "menstrual extraction", the method used by women's organizations back in the 60s.
- 3) How to get illegal prescriptions for misopristone from Mexico.

I can say without hesitation that when Roe is gone, the internet will also carry information about how to get abortions from quacks and from other countries.

Religious support for reproductive freedom is as important today as it ever has been. At the MO RCRC, we are organizing clergy from all over Missouri to fight the ever-increasing bad legislation meant to restrict access to abortion and contraception. We are organizing clergy to speak to the media and tell the truth about the widespread religious support for private healthcare choices. Too often, the media does not want to tell our side of the story. We don't have neat little soundbites to explain all of the varieties of religious understandings that make us pro-choice. We won't misquote a verse of scripture just to prove ourselves.

For Jewish people, tradition and law indicate that fetal life and a woman's life are not equal. The woman's life always takes precedence.

For Christian people, we point to the ways Jesus interacted with women, demonstrating compassion and respect, and never siding with those who judged their sexual behavior.

For Buddhists, abortion may be necessary on one's life path. In reincarnation, the child may choose a better life.

For Muslims, the soul enters the fetus at 120 days, and abortion is allowable during that time.

For many of us, justice for all people includes the ability to choose for oneself whether and when to be a parent. The decision NOT to bring a child into bad circumstances is a loving and moral choice. And our responsibility to provide thorough healthcare is a moral mandate.

As frightening as all of the legislation is in Missouri, there is an even greater danger in the courts, one that reaches far beyond women's health or women's rights. Think with me again about the law that congress called "The Partial-Birth Abortion Act". The constitutional problem with the law against the "D and X" procedure was that there was no exception for the health of the mother. Doctors testified to congress that the procedure was necessary to save the health of the mother, but Congress disagreed. They did not put a health exception in the law. Instead they wrote into the law that no health exception was needed because the procedure was never necessary. If the Supreme Court upholds the law ignoring all of the doctors, they will have given elected officials the authority to decide what is medically and scientifically true.

They also tried to do this with the Terry Schiavo case, ignoring the prognosis of the patient's own doctors. It is happening around the country wherever school boards are demanding that "intelligent design" be taught in science class. It is happening on Matt Blunt's website where it says that the morning after pill causes abortion. It happens when the President says that more research needs to be done before we can say that global warming is real.

It would seem that we don't just return to 1966, we return to the day of Galileo, when elected leaders had the power to ignore all scientific evidence and to bow to the pressure of narrow religious dogma. The decisions of whether to use contraceptives or whether to abort a pregnancy are very personal matters between a woman and her doctor. No legislative body should have the right to intervene in anyone's medical decisions under any circumstances. Elected officials should never be allowed to elevate their authority over the expertise of doctors and scientists.

These are scary times. I hope you as physicians will fight these infringements into your practice. Thank you for your attention.