



Abortion: The Evidence for the Ethics

from the Philadelphia Guild of the Catholic Medical Association (<http://www.cathmedphila.org/>)

Then purpose of this piece is to explain some of the scientific evidence that supports the Catholic Church's teaching on abortion. The Church's opposition to abortion is based primarily on moral grounds. As such, scientific evidence is not needed to justify the Church's position. However, there is mounting evidence that opposing the natural moral law, which the Church upholds, has negative effects on individuals and on society. Some of the scientific evidence for negative effects from abortion is presented here.

Q: What is the Church's teaching on abortion?

A: As noted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC: 2270-2271), "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person--among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life. Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law." This clear moral teaching is not accepted by many in our society, and they would argue that the higher ethical principle is that of a woman's right to choose. If they are correct, one could infer that it procuring an abortion would not have a negative effect on women who have them. Here are some of the scientific facts.

Q: Are there medical side effects from abortion?

A: Yes, there are several. Abortion may cause complications in subsequent pregnancies. There is a higher incidence of placenta previa (the placenta covering the opening to the uterus) in subsequent pregnancies, as well as pre-term birth and low birth rates. These risks increase with increasing numbers of abortions. There is also a controversial link between abortion and breast cancer, but the evidence does suggest an increase risk of about 30% for breast cancer for women who have had an abortion. In contrast, carrying an infant to term reduces the risk of breast cancer. These risks have recently been summarized in an article in the Linacre Quarterly (V72, pp44, 2005).

Q: Are there psychological effects of abortion?

A: There are many psychological effects of abortion. Abortion advocates would point to studies that indicate that most women benefit from a feeling of relief in the months following termination of an unwanted pregnancy. However, there are many more negative psychological effects from abortion. The most dramatic evidence for negative psychological effects is the increased incidence of suicide following an abortion. Some studies estimate a 3 fold increased risk for suicide following abortion, while women who carry to term have about half the risk as women who were not pregnant. There is also an increased risk from death due to accidents, perhaps due to risk-taking behavior, following abortion. Admissions to psychiatric hospitals following abortion are increased compared to women carrying to term. There is also a significantly higher incidence of substance abuse (drugs and alcohol) in women who have had abortions. The rate of major depression appears higher following abortion, as is generalized anxiety disorder. Some experts in post-abortion syndrome estimate that the vast majority (close to 100%) of women who have had an abortion develop post-traumatic stress disorder (manifesting in symptoms such as anxiety, irritability, aggressive behavior, difficulty concentrating, flashbacks, nightmares, risk taking behavior, suicidal impulses, memory blocks, withdrawal from relationships, avoidance of children and others) which negatively impacts their psychological health. These experts suggest even for women who appear psychologically well following abortion can have difficulties surface years after the abortion. Some studies show the negative psychological effects of abortions persisting for years when untreated. While some studies indicate that abortion does not increase the risk of "clinically significant" depression,

there are no studies that indicate a long term psychological beneficial effect of abortion. Overall, the available data indicates abortion has negative psychological effects on the women who choose to abort.

Q: What are the effects of abortion on interpersonal relationships?

A: About half of women who have had an abortion may lose pleasure from sexual intercourse, and a similar proportion may develop an aversion to intercourse. Women who have had abortions are more likely to have shorter subsequent relationships and more negative relationships. Women who have had abortions also experience difficulties parenting subsequent children. These difficulties can include being over protective, spoiling the children, trying to be too perfect as a mother, or at the other end being more abusive toward the children.

Q: If a pregnancy is terminated due to fetal anomalies (spina bifida, Down's syndrome, etc.), are the psychological effects the same? What about after a rape?

A: Pregnancy termination following genetic testing (amniocentesis) is becoming increasingly prevalent. Studies of women who chose to terminate such pregnancies indicate that this is an emotionally traumatic major life event which leads to severe posttraumatic stress response and intense grief reactions that are still detectable some years later. In the case of rape, a survey of women who had abortions following a rape indicates that 89% regretted their decision, and >90% would discourage other sexual assault victims from opting for abortion. In contrast, a survey of sexual assault victims who carried to term indicated that 100% believed they made the right decision.

Q: What does the Church teach about cases of abortion to save the life of the mother?

A: It should be noted that this situation is extremely rare, and some say never occurs. For example, C. Everett Koop, former U.S. Surgeon General, has written, "Protection of the life of the mother as an excuse for an abortion is a smoke screen. In my 36 years of pediatric surgery, I have never known of one instance where the child had to be aborted to save the mother's life. If toward the end of the pregnancy complications arise that threaten the mother's health, the doctor will induce labor or perform a Caesarean section. His intention is to save the life of both the mother and the baby. The baby's life is never willfully destroyed because the mother's life is in danger." The Church teaches that the direct, intended destruction of human life is immoral. Catholic moral teaching also includes the principle of double effect, which states that if an action has two effects, one good and one evil, it may be permissible under these conditions: only the good effect of the action is intended, the action itself is not evil, the evil effect is not the cause of the good effect, and the evil effect is of lesser or equal gravity than the good effect. Ectopic pregnancy (where the fetus is implanted someplace other than the uterus, usually in one of the fallopian tubes) can be life-threatening to the mother. If this is the case, the diseased tube can be removed to save the life of mother, which would result in the unintended death of the child. However, the deliberate, direct destruction of the child would be immoral. Thus, abortion still is not allowed (which involves the direct killing of the fetus), but the fetus (and the diseased tube) may be removed from the mother to save her life.

Q: Is there any help available for women who have suffered problems following an abortion?

A: Yes! If you, or someone you know, have been affected by abortion, know that God still loves and cherishes you, as does the Church. Healing is possible, and there are healing ministries to help those affected by abortion and sexual abuse. Consider contacting Project Rachel, which is the Catholic Church's healing ministry to those who have been involved in abortion. National Suicide Hope Line - 1-800-784-2433 <http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/> or the associated Rachel's Vineyard Ministries at 1-877-HOPE 4 ME (877 467 3463) or <http://www.rachelsvineyard.org/>.

For more information on abortion check out the "Life Issues" link on the US Conference of Catholic Bishops website: <http://www.usccb.org/index.shtml>. and the "Evidence Based Ethics" link on the Philadelphia Catholic Medical Association website <http://www.cathmedphila.org/>.