

Terminate Pregnancy, Do Not Exterminate Women

REPORTS and research papers published over the last two years in *The Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of India*, reveal some very disturbing facts about illegal abortions in the country.

Abortion was legalised in 1972. The number of legal abortions is increasing steadily each year. But, unfortunately, so is the number of illegal abortions.

The reason is that through sustained propaganda, people have been led to believe that abortion is a very trivial operation. It is often advertised as "Costs Rs 65, come in lunch break, get it done and walk home." This kind of tacit encouragement to commercial interests has opened the floodgates to illegal practitioners. Abortion is projected as a procedure of little financial, physical and physiological consequence.

It is projected as a simple procedure that any one with any sort of medical qualification —allopathic, ayurvedic or homeopathic - is competent to perform. It is even said that nonmedical persons can easily learn the technique. Judging from the number of septic abortion cases admitted to hospitals, the incidence of illegal abortion is increasing.

A study done in Thanjavur Medical College, Tamil Nadu, reports that the incidence of illegal abortions turning septic has doubled, from 4.55 percent before 1972 to 9.95 percent after 1972, the year abortion was legalised. Of a total of 4,698 abortion cases in the hospital between 1964 and 1971, 214 were septic abortions; of the 5,355 abortion cases between 1972 and 1978, 533 were septic abortions.

In spite of all the modern and safe methods of termination of pregnancy available in the country, severely damaging and often ghastly methods continue to be used to induce abortion. A

spate of reports in the last two years reveal that iron nails, sticks, coconut splinters, and Fetex, a dangerous chemical paste, have all been used to induce abortion by illegal abortionists.

The havoc caused by septic abortions also continues unabated in spite of all the powerful infection

Prof. B. Kishore and his colleagues report from SK Medical College Hospital, Muzaffarpur, a case of illegal abortion conducted on a 19 year old unmarried girl by a village quack, which resulted in so large a perforation of the uterus that 15 feet of intestine were projecting from the vagina when she was brought to the hospital.

controlling drugs available now. There are no beds specifically earmarked for abortion cases in hospitals. Centres for medical termination of pregnancy have to be approved by medical authorities. But many unapproved ones continue to function.

A report from Patna Medical College Hospital reveals that maternal deaths due to abortion have increased from 5.6 percent of all maternal deaths between 1961 and 1965 to 9.0 percent between 1976 and 1980. In the Thanjavur study, 40 percent of all septic abortion cases admitted, died or were severely crippled for life.

The type of injuries inflicted by illegal abortionists make ghastly reading. Perforation of uterus and injury to rectum, urinary bladder, intestines and liver, severe infection of the peritoneum and chemical burning and sloughing of internal organs, have all been recorded in recently reported cases.

In the Thanjavur study of 747 septic abortion cases, the authors report in detail

on the unauthorised persons responsible for criminal abortions and the methods they employ. The authors' conclusion is: "It appears as though prior to the law, there were a few illegal abortionists somewhere but now there are illegal abortionists everywhere because they presume that the law permits everybody to do abortions." Reports from Lucknow, Muzaffarpur, Murshidabad, Gauhati, Madras and Ranchi tell the same tale.

That illegal abortions, even when they prove fatal, are not considered criminal and reported to the police, as required by law, is exemplified by the observation of the attending doctors in the report from Ranchi Medical College: "As her relatives were not willing, autopsy could not be done."

Fetex chemical paste, licensed, publicised and popularised as an abortifacient paste, has caused severe peritonitis, gangrene of organs and kidney failure in many cases. In the Thanjavur study, this paste is reported to have been used in 30 percent of the 747 septic abortion cases. In the latest issue of *The*

Dr Mahendra Goswami and Dr Gopal Chandra Sharma reported from Gauhati Medical College, a case in which the abortionist did not recognise the mouth of the uterus and instead pushed an 11 centimetre long herbal stick through the wall of the vagina, inside the urinary bladder, leading to painful bleeding in the urine.

Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of India, three cases of septic abortion caused by Fetex paste are reported from MGM Medical College and MY hospital, Indore. Two of the women died and the third survived renal failure but her "whole vagina and cervix were sloughed and necrosed."

The Indore doctors recommend that advertisements of Fetex paste should be stopped and "the product should be withdrawn from the market." Yet such is the efficiency of drugs control machinery in our country that after years of reporting on the fatal effects of this paste, it continues to be licensed and marketed. □