Abortion briefing
May 2008

INTRODUCTION

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill represents the first major opportunity in almost 20 years to make changes to the law on abortion. Amendments are expected both from those who oppose abortion and those who wish to make it more widely available.

Key facts

- **6.7 million abortions** since the 1967 Abortion Act.¹
  - 0.4% because of risk to the mother’s life.
  - 1.3% performed on the grounds of foetal handicap.²
- In 2006, **98% of abortions were for ‘social reasons’**.³
- **About 1 in 5 British pregnancies now ends in abortion.**⁴

2. House of Commons, Hansard, 8 November 2006, col. 1792 wa
3. Abortion Statistics, England and Wales: 2006, Department of Health, June 2007, para. 4.2.2

Parliament to consider reducing upper time limit on abortions

Pro-life MPs are to table amendments to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill which would reduce the upper time limit for abortions. The number of abortions in Great Britain is now four times higher than in 1969, the first full year in which abortion was legal, and this Bill represents the first significant opportunity since 1990 to begin to reduce this number.

At present, abortions for ‘social reasons’ are permitted up to 24 weeks, making British legislation among the most liberal in Europe. In most other EU countries abortion is only available up to the 12th week.¹ (Abortion is not legal in Northern Ireland – see inside.)

Images from 4D ultrasound technology of unborn babies ‘walking in the womb’, and showing their obvious human characteristics, has increased consciousness of the issue.

Among the arguments in favour of reducing the upper time limit is evidence that foetuses feel pain much earlier than the current 24 week limit and that specialist neo-natal care allows babies born before 24 weeks to survive.

In light of such compelling evidence there is surely a powerful case for significantly lowering the upper limit. Christians holding to the sanctity of life from conception should support any measure which would reduce the number of abortions.

1. Explanatory memorandum to Access to safe and legal abortion, Council of Europe Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 8 April 2008, para. 10
Foetuses can feel pain well below the current 24 week time limit for abortion, according to the evidence of a leading authority on foetal pain. Professor KJS Anand has shown that it is a mistake to assume that pain perception in unborn babies requires the same structures as in adults. His research demonstrates that the neural mechanisms used for pain processing in foetal life are different from those of fully-developed babies or adults and that they exist at 20 weeks of gestation and possibly earlier.¹

The opinions of the Committee and the RCOG assume that foetal consciousness of pain relies on neural structures which are not established before 26 weeks, chiefly those connecting the thalamus to the cerebral cortex. It is this assumption that Professor Anand and other medical researchers dispute. For more than ten years it has been common practice to prescribe analgesia to pre-term infants and open-minded scientists have preferred to err on the side of caution.³

² House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006-07, HC 1045-I, vol. 1, page 23
³ Glover, V and Fisk, N, ‘We don’t know: better to err on the safe side from mid-gestation’, British Medical Journal, 313, September 1996, page 796
Serious consequences for the mother

Scientific evidence continues to indicate that abortion carries significant physiological and psychological risks.

Mental illness

After years of denial, the Royal College of Psychiatrists recently released a statement recognising that having an abortion may damage a woman’s mental health. It advises that women should be made aware of these risks before proceeding. Studies show that women having induced abortions are almost twice as likely to suffer mental health problems, three times as likely to have major depression and six times as likely to commit suicide as mothers who do not have an abortion.

Risk of breast cancer

It is widely recognised that carrying a pregnancy to birth significantly reduces the risk of breast cancer. Abortion not only prevents this protective effect, but may also introduce a new risk by interrupting hormonal development and leaving more potentially malignant cells. A comprehensive study suggested that having an abortion gives a woman a 30% greater risk of suffering breast cancer.

Physical dangers

Abortion procedures carry a significant level of risk. Surgical abortion is as liable to complications as any invasive medical procedure. Medical abortion (ie drug-induced) has only been practised for a decade so research into its effects is scarce. However, mifepristone, the drug used for medical abortions, has been linked to some fatalities in both North America and the UK.

Abortion statistics

Number of abortions per year in England and Wales since 1969

1 Abortion Statistics, England and Wales: 2006, Department of Health, June 2007, Table 1

Multiple abortions in 2006 in England and Wales

Of the 200,000 abortions that took place in 2006, 32% were performed on women who had already had at least one other abortion.

1 House of Commons, Hansard, 18 March 2008, col. 997 wa
Making a bad law worse

Pro-abortion campaigners claim the current law restricts access to abortion and causes undue delays.

But abortion is a unique medical procedure because it involves the deliberate ending of a human life. It therefore demands a unique degree of legal accountability and attention to patient safety. Restrictions regarding practitioners, suitable venues and stringent authorisation are the very conditions on which the Abortion Act 1967 exempts practitioners from criminal liability for unlawful killing.

Claims that these requirements cause undue delays are purely anecdotal. Some of the liberalising proposals below have already met with opposition from GPs and the BMA.1

Abortion is not just another medical procedure. Attempts to normalise, even trivialise, abortion should be opposed.

### Current law

The Abortion Act 1967 permits an abortion up to 24 weeks gestation if it involves a lower risk of injuring the “physical or mental health” of a pregnant woman or any existing children of her family than continuing the pregnancy. This aspect of the law has been loosely applied, allowing unwanted babies to be aborted for social reasons. An overwhelming majority of abortions come under this provision.

The Act also allows abortion up to birth if it is “necessary” to prevent grave permanent injury to the woman, the pregnancy threatens the woman’s life or there is a “substantial risk” that the child would be born “seriously handicapped”. However “serious handicap” has been interpreted by doctors to include treatable conditions such as cleft palate or club foot.

### Liberalising proposals

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<th>Current law</th>
<th>Liberalising proposals</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion requires two doctors’ signatures</td>
<td>Abortion to be available on demand up to 12 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Only doctors can perform abortions or sign authorisation forms</td>
<td>Nurses to be allowed to authorise and carry out medical and early surgical abortions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion is only permitted in approved places such as NHS hospitals and private clinics</td>
<td>Medical (drug-induced) abortions to be performed in GPs’ clinics or even self-administered in the home</td>
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The creation of life

### Fertilisation

A sperm penetrates the egg’s cell membrane and the nuclei of sperm and egg fuse to create a single cell with a unique genetic code. Human life has begun.

### Week 1

The embryo reaches the uterus, which has already prepared a special lining. The delicate process of implantation takes place.

### Week 5

Already the embryo’s heart is pumping blood. Major organs have begun to grow and limb buds have sprouted. Some facial features are evident. Brain signals have been recorded from about 40 days.
Lords disability amendment

An amendment to remove disability as a ground for abortion was defeated in the Lords, but a similar amendment is likely to be tabled in the Commons.

The phrase “such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped” has been interpreted so widely as to include reversible conditions such as a cleft palate.1

Disability rights campaigners have joined pro-life groups in calling for the amendment, arguing that the current law discriminates against the disabled.

1 House of Commons, Hansard, 8 November 2006, col. 1792W

Pro-life doctors could be gagged

There are concerns at a possible ‘exclusion order’ amendment to bar pro-life doctors from seeing women seeking abortion. The aim of such a move would be to ensure that patients only receive the advice and opinions of pro-abortion doctors. But pro-life professionals are subject to regulatory bodies and codes of conduct, and are perfectly capable of giving advice based on sound medical evidence.

Proposals to tell mothers ‘the facts’

There is increasing support for provisions which would ensure that women considering abortion are given factual information about the associated risks and the availability of alternatives such as adoption.

Amendments could be tabled to the HFE Bill to make counselling or a ‘cooling off’ period compulsory. Most Western European states already have mandatory counselling.1

1 Explanatory memorandum to Access to safe and legal abortion, Council of Europe Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 8 April 2008, para. 11

Threat facing Northern Ireland

Currently abortion is only available in Northern Ireland when the mother’s life is in danger. The Abortion Act 1967 does not apply in the Province. Pro-abortion campaigners are trying to extend the Act to Northern Ireland. Last October the Northern Ireland Assembly, following public opinion, strongly opposed “any attempt to make abortion more widely available in Northern Ireland”.1

1 Northern Ireland Assembly Official Report, 22 October 2007

Week 9
The foetus has begun to move. All organs, muscles and nerves are beginning to function. Limbs, digits, joints and even fingerprints are evident.

Week 16
The sex is apparent. The foetus has hair, nails and a cartilage skeleton. It can pull faces.

Week 20
Growing rapidly, the baby can turn somersaults and suck his or her thumb.1

1 Sources: Nilsson, L and Hamberger, L, A Child is Born, Doubleday, 2003, and http://www.babycentre.co.uk/pregnancy/fetaldevelopment/
What the Bible says about abortion

The biblical argument against abortion is simply the application of the Sixth Commandment: ‘You shall not murder’.1 The Bible clearly teaches that the intentional taking of innocent human life is evil because it is the destruction of that which is made in the image of God.2 The specific question in relation to abortion is whether the foetus is a human being in the image of God. The testimony of Scripture is that it is.

The Psalmist famously praises God because he “created my inmost being … knit me together in my mother’s womb”.3 God saw his “unformed body”, that is God saw the Psalmist as an embryo.4 In Psalm 51:5 David recognises that his need for a Saviour began at the very point of his conception.

The Bible clearly teaches the sanctity of each human life from conception. Abortion at any stage of gestation is the taking of human life.

1 Exodus 20:13
2 Genesis 1:26, 9:6
3 Psalm 139:16
4 Psalm 139:13
5 Luke 1:35

Christian opposition to abortion is not a novelty of modern theology; the Church has stood opposed to it for 2000 years. The early Church “with unwavering consistency and with the strongest emphasis denounced the practice [of abortion], not simply as inhuman, but as definitely murder”.1 The Didache (a First or early Second Century church teaching manual) condemns abortion and the taking of life after birth: “You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is born.”

The practice was roundly condemned in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, Jerome, John Chrysostom, and Augustine.3

David Braine concluded “for the whole of Christian history until appreciably after 1900… there was virtually complete unanimity amongst Christians, evangelical, catholic, orthodox” that abortion is wrong.4

Influential 16th Century Reformer John Calvin commented: “…the foetus, though enclosed in the womb of its mother, is already a human being… If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man’s house is his place of most secure refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy a foetus in the womb before it has come to light.”5

2 Didache 2:2
3 Cameron, N and Sims P, Abortion: The crisis in morals and medicine, IVP, 1986, page 29
4 Cited in loc cit

A history of Christian opposition