

# ABORTION

In this article, the intention is to lay some foundations for you to start to grapple with the abortion issue for yourself. I have set out the legal position first, so that you know in law what you can and cannot do. Then I have set out some of the arguments that you are likely to come across in lectures and in practice as you start to engage with people on this issue. It is worth thinking through how as Christians you might respond to some of these arguments. Finally I have concluded with some biblical pointers that will help you to work out where you stand on this issue as a Christian.

For some of you this will be harder than for others. Submission to God's values may mean a costly re-evaluation of your own principles. Remember, though, that to assert your own value system over and above God's is to reject God himself and this is a dangerous position for the Christian to find himself or herself in – it is a non-Christian position!

You may find this hard because of personal experience with the issue. Remember that God longs to forgive all who truly repent and is ABLE to forgive all who truly repent. Drink deeply from the Bible and you will get to know a God of love, justice and mercy who is able to care for the aborted baby and the one who has had an abortion, according to his perfect character.

Since the decriminalisation of abortion in 1967, this has remained one of the most hotly contended ethical issues we have to face within the nursing professions; it is deeply emotive and often personally painful.

At a practical level, there seems to be little problem. The Abortion Act of 1967 itself has a conscientious objection clause built into it - section four - which reads as follows:

*no person shall be under any duty, whether by contract by statutory or other legal requirement, to participate in any treatment authorised by this Act to which he has a conscientious objection, provided that in any legal proceeding the burden of proof of conscientious objection shall rest on the person claiming it.*

The NMC Code of Conduct also upholds the law in this respect, and in clause 2.5 says:

*you must report to a relevant person or authority, at the earliest possible time, any conscientious objection that may be relevant to your professional practice. You must continue to provide care to the best of your ability until alternative arrangements are implemented.*

Under normal circumstances no one needs to be involved with the process of aborting a pregnancy against their will or judgement. However, the RCN and the NMC do advise that in cases of emergency, the conscientious objection should not apply, and that in practice it applies to the abortifacient procedure alone and does not include pre- or post-abortion care.

This means that in practice you are not obliged to be present at an abortion whether it be by medical or surgical means, although you will need to think through your ability to care for women pre- and post-abortion. For students, I would suggest that if you have any reservations about your ability to care for such patients' needs, it is perfectly appropriate that you should discuss these with your mentor / ward manager / clinical tutor at the start of your placement. Be honest and gentle, but don't let anyone force you into acting against your conscience. Think of it as a great opportunity to share the

gospel with someone! For qualified staff, if you find it difficult to care well for pre- and post-termination women, then you might find that some areas of nursing are closed off to you.

However the reality is that as we start to engage with others on a one-to-one level or in lectures emotions will start to run high. Both sides of the fence will be arguing from the desire to protect the rights of their chosen champion. The pro-abortionists will argue the mother's right to choose, whilst those against abortion will argue the baby's right to life. We will get nowhere in these situations by simply throwing scripture into the debate and adding God's values as a third protagonist. We need to be clear on what God's values are, and the final section of this article comprises of a set of questions and scriptural references that will help you to be clear in your own mind on the Christian values as expressed by scripture. However we also need to try to understand the value systems of those on opposite sides of the argument so that we can engage with them and reason with them and ultimately present them with God's standards. To this end, after each section on the pro- and anti-abortion arguments there will be a list of questions designed to help you think through a Christian response to the value systems expressed and a list of further resources.

### **Some Pro-Abortion Arguments**

Women have the right to make choices about and be responsible for their own body. As long as the foetus is dependent upon the mother for survival, the mother's rights override those of the foetus.

For many women, pregnancy is seen as a disaster because they are not in the right place in their life to cope with a baby. A baby would disrupt their career, their education, their finances, their life style, their partner would leave them or they have no particular partner. Basically they resent the intrusion of a baby into their life at this stage and the costs that come with it.

We could suggest that the time for making choices and taking control comes *before* conception, and that this attitude is symptomatic of someone who is essentially self-centred, but with the ready availability of abortions, contraception and the societal acceptance of multiple pre-marital sexual relationships, it is no wonder that this attitude prevails.

For many other women a pregnancy might seem more of an understandable calamity. It is not so much about personal inconvenience as about trauma or suffering: the woman who has become pregnant as a result of rape (although the number of women falling into this category are few); the woman whose family is already large and the family budget over-stretched; the teenager whose family would disown her or throw her out; the woman with sick or disabled family members to care for who is already worn out and exhausted, or the woman with a violent or abusive partner. For many women in these situations an abortion might indeed seem a loving solution to their predicament. The tragedy is that so often it is not the baby that is unwanted, but rather the situation that seems hopeless. Actually an abortion in these situations can be far from a quick fix solution but brings its own agonies and scars, and can make a woman's emotional state even worse.

One of the many 'medical' reasons that abortion was legalised and for which it has gained acceptability is so that we can terminate the pregnancy of congenitally disabled fetuses – that is one of the major reasons for performing foetal scans and tests. Someone's life is not worth living unless they have the capacity to be cognitively independent and with no apparent physical abnormalities – otherwise they are not worth loving or caring for and there is nothing in the world that can make life worthwhile for them. We might not articulate it in this way, but that is the implication behind our actions. It is also worth considering the impact that such views have upon those who live today with the kinds of conditions for which abortions are routinely performed. It is also worth remembering that the emotional trauma of having an abortion is not cancelled out by the knowledge that the aborted child would have been disabled in some way. In many cases it only adds to the emotional burden.

Another pro-abortion argument is that to make abortion illegal would result in a return to the trade of back-street abortions, which was the cause of a significant number of maternal deaths prior to 1967 and one of the main reasons for legalising abortion.

Finally the pro-abortionists will say, of the status of the foetus, that it is in some sense sub-human, that whatever it is that makes a person a person, a foetus at abortifacient age doesn't have it.

## Some Anti Abortion Arguments

The biggest anti-abortion argument concerns the rights of the foetus, and especially the status of the foetus. If a foetus of abortifacient age is considered human then the argument that abortion is murder becomes very strong. One of the biggest questions anti-abortionists have to face is whether the foetus has a right to life.

The moral argument of putting the mother's alleged needs before the child's needs is also considerably weakened where the foetus is regarded as a potential human being.

## Group Activity

**Wanting to be in control, to be god in our own lives is the very definition of sin. Sin is as much an attitude as an activity. The Pharisees outwardly did all and more than was called for of God-fearing people, yet Jesus calls them white-washed tombs. Just to stop someone having an abortion may save them much heartache now, but it does nothing to deal with the fundamental attitude of rebellion against God, of setting ourselves in the driving seat and dictating the way our lives are going to be ordered.**

- Read James 4:13-16, Isaiah 5:20 and Isaiah 40:12-26. What is wrong with the attitude of those who want an abortion because it is inconvenient?
- In what ways has society promoted a convenience culture (think about the media and the values you are being taught in lectures particularly)?
- How would you start to talk about God with someone who wanted an abortion because it was inconvenient?

**Wanting to escape pain and suffering is perfectly natural, but abortion will not necessarily enable this.**

- In what ways does society cheapen or blind us to emotional pain?
- Why is abortion not always an exercise of liberated autonomy as many claim it to be?
- Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-6, John 11:32-36, Luke 22:42-44 and Hebrews 4:14-16. How can telling people about Jesus help them in their suffering?
- How would you start to talk about Jesus to someone who wanted an abortion due to a perception of suffering?
- What is it that makes life worth living?
- What implications does abortion for foetal abnormalities have for the disabled?

## Some Christian Considerations

The two major issues for a Christian that are challenged by the abortion debate are the sovereignty of God and the sanctity of human life, or in other words, who is in control and what value is to be placed on human life. The following set of Bible references are aimed at helping you to work through the issues for yourself.

- 1. What value is to be placed on human life?**  
 Genesis 1:26-27  
 Genesis 9:5-6  
 Psalm 72:12-14
  
- 2. When does life begin?**  
 Psalm 139 (esp. v13-16)  
 Psalm 51:5  
 Psalm 22:9-10  
 Jeremiah 1:4-5  
 Ephesians 1:3-4
  
- 3. Who has control over life?**  
 Genesis 15:3  
 Genesis 17:17-21  
 Job 1:21  
 Job 31:15  
 John 5:21  
 2 Corinthians 4:6
  
- 4. What does God have to say about the taking of human life?**  
 Genesis 9:6  
 Exodus 20:13  
 Matthew 5:21
  
- 5. What about the accidental taking of human life?**  
 Exodus 21:28-29  
 Deuteronomy 22:8
  
- 6. Are there any exceptions?**  
*Public Justice:* Exodus 21:15  
                           Romans 13:1-7  
                           Acts 25:11  
                           Exodus 23:6-7  
  
*Lawful War:* Deuteronomy 20  
  
*Necessary Defence:* Exodus 22:2
  
- 7. What does God say about our responsibility towards others?**  
                           Psalm 41:1  
                           Psalm 82:3-4  
                           Proverbs 31:8-9  
                           Isaiah 58:5-7  
                           Amos 4:1  
                           James 1:27

From all the references above you should be able to work out what the bible says on abortion. Life has value because we are made in God's image and known by God. If we are known by God before the beginning of time and knit together by him in the womb then that should be enough for us to place the highest value on every foetus's life, regardless of gestation. To ask at what point does a foetus become a person is to miss the point. We have a duty to protect the weak and vulnerable against

accident and all calamity, and to positively look after them. Killing is a tool of public justice in a fallen world, but is not something in which God takes any delight (Ezekiel 33:11). It can never be in the interests of public justice or war that abortion is sanctioned. Even terminating a pregnancy where the baby has congenital disabilities, which today is deemed medically acceptable, would be hard to justify biblically given the call to protect the weak and the vulnerable. Possibly the only biblical justification for abortion comes under 'necessary defence', if the life of the mother is at risk if the pregnancy were to continue.

Once you have worked out what you think about abortion you might find it helpful to chat through with other Christian colleagues how you would care faithfully for women pre- and post-termination since this is the one situation you might find yourself in. Is it something you think you can do in good conscience or is this going to be an area of nursing that is closed to you? If you think you can do it, you need to work out how you are going to show love and compassion for the lost and needy whilst at the same time holding on to God's values; how you are going to offer comfort and at the same time be ready to call people to repentance; how you are going to protect your heart and mind so that your Christian commitment doesn't get worn away by the world's values. So often we fail to proclaim God's name in a world that needs to hear it because we simply aren't prepared – we haven't thought it through in advance. I hope this article helps you to start to do some thinking!!