

STATS WARS: THE FARCE IS WITH US IN “THE ABORTION DEBATE”

WHAT DEBATE?

If one exists at all, “The Abortion Debate” is a farce. Abortion has been an accessible legal option in Australia for years, yet a small group of people are trying to change all that. Anti Abortionists believe that abortion is always wrong. They represent less than 10% of the Australian community but this extremist minority group is hell-bent in hijacking abortion issues. In a democracy everyone has a right to their view, but the majority rules. Over 80% of the Australian community believes that women deserve a choice.

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003, Australian National University <http://assda.anu.edu.au/studies/D1070.html>

So why do anti abortionists, who prefer to call themselves pro-lifers, get such a big say in the media?

The term “debate” implies there are two opposing views. The opposite of anti-abortion is pro-abortion where it would be considered that abortion is always the way to go. Clearly no such group exists in Australia. Pro-choice is not the opposite of anti-abortion. It is, in fact, the moderate view held by the vast majority of Australians. Someone with pro-choice views believes in a woman’s right to choose an abortion and just as vehemently as an anti-abortionist that no woman should be forced to have an abortion against her will. Pro-choice supporters also believe coercion is wrong. They do not tolerate the use of biased information, unscientific data, anecdote or religious propaganda to frighten women in to making any decision about abortion. Both groups reject anyone who tries this sort of tactic to seduce a woman into having an abortion. However anti-abortionists condone and employ these methods to dissuade women from accessing abortions. If there is any debate at all it is only about choice. No one has the right to restrict someone’s access to legal alternatives. No minority group has the right to influence a parliamentary vote to restrict the community from safe medical options.

MEDICINE AND MEDIA MANIPULATED BY MINORITY?

In the media when a journalist prepares a news story on a particular issue, their editor will require a report that shows both sides of an argument. To achieve this the journalist will usually seek interviews from representatives and give equal weighting to each. While this is responsible media journalism it may not allow accurate representation of the amount of support that particular view has in the community. The journalist may not have time or space to allow more than a brief statement from each side, so the “debate” could end up being judged on charisma more than robust data. Could it be that anti-abortionists have taken advantage of this ethical code amongst journalists to inflate their power base and manipulate public perception of the strength of their arguments?

The media’s notion of balance can cause problems with scientific reporting. In science a debate is settled using statistical analysis where weight of evidence should knock out one side. An opposition who use anecdote don’t get a look in. However statistics can be tricky to understand and even experts occasionally get caught out. Hence the famous quotes – “there are three types of lies: Lies, Damn lies and Statistics” and “if you torture statistics long enough they will tell you anything you want them to”. It is sad to admit but just like clever politicians use words, some statisticians use numbers to put a gloss the truth. Not only this, but also these days many scientific journals employ PR people write media releases so this may add an extra layer of spin to the data. No wonder scientists are gnashing their teeth and wringing their hands over the way the media reports medical data. There is fault on both sides. Scientific data needs to be more transparent and journalists need to ensure their reports are in perspective.

But there is another problem: Sometimes the subtleties of the scientific language get lost in translation between a scientific publication and media news report. A good example of this is “Abortion in Young Women and Subsequent Mental Health” by Dr David Fergusson in the January 2006 edition of Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry. (<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2005.01538.x>)

Nowhere in the article does Dr Fergusson claim to have found **proof** that abortion **causes** any mental disorder. In fact Dr Fergusson spends a lot of time explaining the shortcomings of the study not the least of which is the failure to take into account wantedness of the pregnancy which means it could be said the study was like comparing apples with oranges.

The abstract clearly states: “*The findings **suggest** that abortion in young women **may be associated with increased risks of mental health problems**”*. And in the full version of the paper the Dr Fergusson goes on to

state, “*On the basis of the current study, it is our view that the issue of whether or not abortion has harmful effects on mental health remains to be fully resolved.*”

When digesting these conclusions it is vital not to be tempted to read more into it. The word **suggest** doesn't mean **prove**, **may** doesn't mean **will**, and the phrase **associated with increased risk** doesn't mean **causes**. And more over **remains to be fully resolved** really does mean **we don't know the answer yet**.

However when the Fergusson findings were reported widely by media there were some translation issues. The ABC's 7:30 entitled its report “*Higher risk of mental health problems after abortion*” (<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/s1541543.htm>). The aim of a headline is to be as thought provoking as possible so that you will want to see the rest of the report. Unfortunately while words like SUGGEST and MAY are vital to the context of Fergusson's conclusion they take up space in a headline and often fall victim to a sub-editor's delete key. Unfortunately, just like those whispering games playing in primary school, scientific words can slip sideways and get reported with statements even further removed from the original statement as in “*a new study showing abortion strongly increases the chance of women suffering from severe depression and anxiety*” (<http://www.lifenews.com/nat1943.html>). They can even end up morphing into something unrecognisable when used for political gain, as in a comment in the Age newspaper on January 4th attributed to “Right to Life Association's in Simon McCaffrey” (<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2006/01/03/1136050442094.html>) where he reportedly said “*the study proved abortion increased the risk of mental illness and self-harm*” and he was then quoted as saying “*It is incumbent on politicians to make themselves aware of this study ... before inflicting the abortion pill (RU486) on our unsuspecting Australian population.*” (Fergusson's study did not mention RU486....)

Dr Fergusson's small study of 74 females who said they had one or more abortions has gone from being a study consistent with the overwhelming number of previous reputable works showing that there is no proven causal link between abortion and mental illness to being held up as some sort of new gold standard of proof that abortion causes mental illness that the Anti Abortionists want to use to make lawmakers and doctors stop abortions.

One of the confounding factors Fergusson points out that his study did not take into account was experiences women had with accessing information and the procedure. Some people propose that the cause of psychological damage after abortion could be due to poor information designed to stigmatise abortion and induce feelings of guilt in those who choose this option. Could the anti-abortionists themselves could be creating the problem.

I hope parliamentarians do avail themselves of Dr Fergusson's work to see how scientific reporting can be distorted when it falls into the hands of those who don't (want to) understand the language. Mr McCaffrey's statement actually reinforces the need for the amendment to be passed so that the TGA, and not and the Minister for Health, can decide fate of these drugs by evaluating their safety and efficacy on scientific merits, free from the influences of extremist propaganda.

When a woman has made the decision to have a legal abortion based on her particular circumstances, neither politician, religious zealot nor moral extremist have any place in deciding what mode of abortion is appropriate for her. This is a clinical issue and the patient's decision should be based on scientific evidence presented in an unbiased way so that she can weigh up the risks and benefits of the options. The Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005 should be passed to ensure this will happen.

Other References :

Depression and unwanted first pregnancy: longitudinal cohort study Schmiede & Russo, Department of Psychology UCB 345, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0345, USA.
<http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/abstract/331/7528/1303>

RANZCOG guideline for Termination of Pregnancy
<http://www.ranzcog.edu.au/womenshealth/pdfs/Termination-of-pregnancy.pdf>

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The opinions expressed in this article are entirely her own.

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