

Collier's

January 22, 1944

DEATH BEFORE BIRTH

BY
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With more than half a million criminal operations every year, the problem of stamping out the abortion racket is becoming increasingly acute. So far, society hasn't found the answer

IN THE United States today, abortion is big business. Abortion mills, illicit and unsanitary, are steadily increasing in numbers, especially in big cities and near large war plants. Panicky women and girls are paying from \$25 to \$300 for an operation. They come away infected by dirty instruments, with womb punctures or hemorrhages, with incomplete abortions which require more money and more painful, dangerous visits to the abortionist. Some of them die. Others become invalids. Many are made sterile. Nearly all suffer psychologically from shock, fear of arrest and guilt.

How many criminal abortions are performed in the United States is difficult to say. One authority estimates that every year there are 681,600 interruptions of pregnancy, with 8,179 deaths resulting. Some of these are natural miscarriages, a few are legal abortions to save lives; all the rest are criminal abortions.

Doctor Nicholson J. Eastman, professor of obstetrics at Johns Hopkins University and obstetrician-in-chief to Johns Hopkins Hospital, told me recently:

"It's impossible to get accurate figures on criminal abortions. These operations are performed secretly. Conservative estimates range from a hundred thousand to over half a million yearly. From one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand potential American lives are blotted out every year. Besides, these criminal abortions are taking a heavy toll in maternal deaths, injuries and disease."

No reputable physician, Doctor Eastman said emphatically, will ever induce an abortion unless the mother's health is at stake. Even then, he calls other physicians into consultation to make sure that death might result from continued pregnancy. Such legal, "therapeutic" abortions are few—and have no relation whatever to the thousands of unnecessary, secret, criminal operations.

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I asked Doctor Eastman if it is chiefly single women who are having criminal abortions.

"No," he replied positively. "They constitute one group, but not the largest. All the evidence indicates that the vast majority are married women. I estimate that the ratio of married women to single is about four to one. Often the woman is a mother of several other children."

"Then what is the motive?"

"Among married women, there are various motives. Often it's lack of money. The husband is ill or unemployed—or overseas. There are several children; the mother sees no way to feed another child. Then there are the wives employed in business or in war plants. Few firms or factories give maternity leave, and pregnancy usually brings dismissal. So if a woman worker becomes pregnant, and the family is dependent on her job, she may get panicky and go to an abortionist.

Evasion of Responsibility

"Many married women of wealth also are offenders. Thousands of wives who should bear children, who could provide them with every advantage, are rushing instead to abortionists to avoid the inconvenience of childbirth."

The present war has fanned the abortion racket from a flame to a blaze. Now it's a nation-wide problem. Every large city knows precisely what's going on. Some cities appear apathetic, but others are waging a grim campaign to smoke out the wartime abortionists and send them to prison. In most states, the patients, too, can be imprisoned, and a woman undergoing an illegal abortion, or awaiting her turn in the anteroom, risks a sudden raid by police—or else having her name discovered, months later, in the abortionist's office records.

For two years, Frank S. Hogan, district attorney of New York County, has fought a bitter fight to end Manhattan's abortion racket. As a result, five flourishing abortion mills collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, averaging 30 to 40 illegal operations a week at from \$100 to \$300 each, have been closed down since 1941.

One of these mills, run on the assembly-line principle, yielded an annual income of \$150,000. Another brought in a daily income of \$250 to \$300. A third operated with the aid of a "publicity man," who gave druggists a 50 per cent commission for sending patients. With one exception, the men who ran these places are now in prison, but that doesn't mean abortions have been abolished in New York. They are being performed there every day.

I have studied the court hearings on these mills. No physical examination was made of any of the women to determine her state of health and whether an abortion was even safe. Often no nurse was present. Sometimes an anesthetic was given; usually there was none.

The women testifying in court described hasty, intensely painful operations. There was no hospitalization, each patient staying only half an hour. In some cases, the operation had to be repeated, was still unsuccessful, but produced such unbearable pains and uncontrollable hemorrhages that the woman had to appeal for help to a reputable doctor or a city hospital.

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Some who thus appealed were found to have badly infected ovaries and womb, and internal injuries, as a result of butchery. Even more serious, in a few instances—due to the abortionist's ignorance, avarice and haste—nonpregnant women, who thought themselves pregnant, were severely injured by the puzzled abortionist's repeated ever more violent attempts to get "results."

Incidentally, this attempt by a medical charlatan to abort a nonpregnant woman is by no means uncommon.

In the Business for Money

"Sometimes a nonpregnant woman is injured horribly," an eminent obstetrician said, "by such an abortionist. Some have even been killed. Pregnancy isn't always easy to determine. It may require patience, delay, many tests. Do these fellows care? No. They want their money. 'The woman says she's pregnant. Operate.'"

Apparently every type of woman and girl, from every occupational group and every social level, was represented among women arrested or questioned in New York.

There were a few professional prostitutes, some mental-borderline cases, and a group of mature married women with outstanding social position and financial security. But the great majority of the patients were young, middle-class, normally decent, educated, self-supporting American women, both married and unmarried. In one abortion mill, four out of nine patients were employed single girls, but in the other four, the great majority were employed married women.

One fact stands out in these court hearings. Most of the women, married and unmarried, had been terrified at the idea of an abortion. This was particularly true of the single girls. They had taken the step in desperation, believing that there was no alternative, no mercy to be expected from industry or society for an unmarried mother and illegitimate baby.

It is tragic that these unmarried girls could not have been told in time where to turn for help in facing illegitimate motherhood, for there are, in every American city, at least a few sources of just such help.

A desperate girl can, at any hour and in any large city, get in touch with some office of the Y.W.C.A., N.C.C.S. and Y.W.H.A. At most railroad stations there is a Travelers Aid representative—kindly, discreet, resourceful. In every city and war center are Salvation Army workers, friendly experts in solving human tangles. There are also the great social welfare organizations, such as the Community Service Society, in New York City, that have college-bred women interviewers trained to discern quickly the needs of a cornered girl and, without meddling or tattling, help to supply these needs.

Miss Anna Kempshall, director of family service of the Community Service Society of New York, is doing an outstanding job in tactfully persuading panicky women who plan an abortion, to bear their babies instead and afterward make happy, useful adjustments to society.

Solution to the Problem

"When a frightened girl planning abor-

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tion comes to us for a talk," Miss Kempshall explained, "we listen understandingly without imposing our opinions. We try to find out her reason for wanting to destroy her child. Then we point out the dangers and lasting ill effects of abortion. At the same time, we quiet her terrible anxiety by showing her that she needn't be a social outcast if she bears her baby. She can have economic and medical aid and complete protection for herself and her child.

"If the girl has been afraid to confide in her family doctor or religious adviser, but longs to do so—we prepare the way. But we will find another physician for her if she prefers that. We never tell her secret to employers, parents or friends, except at her specific request. Sometimes a girl will ask us to approach her employer, try to procure a temporary leave for her. Otherwise, we help her find a new job after the baby's birth."

"Are you ever asked to interview the man in the case?" I inquired.

"Oh, yes; very often. And usually with good results. The girl nearly always asks us to talk it over with the baby's father in a friendly, tactful way—to learn just how he feels about it. In fact, many young men come to us for help when they have made a girl pregnant. We help them, advise them, keep the secret. Numbers of these pregnant girls get married to the men. We've had three marriages recently in which the men married the pregnant girls on their furloughs, and seemed very happy about it. All depends on the case. We never try to force a marriage. It might be the worst possible step.

"Almost any decent young father-to-be—soldier, sailor or civilian—if not accused or threatened with blackmail, if assured instead that he will not be forced, or be humiliated, or be burdened with the whole support of the baby if he does marry the girl—will voluntarily offer marriage. If he is overseas, he may offer his name, and promise the girl marriage on his return. Meantime, the girl, taking the married name, resumes her job, boarding the baby. From overseas, the father contributes; and the three wait for the war's end."

Miss Kempshall said that every pregnant woman should be warned that, according to the highest medical authorities, there is no drug which will cause abortion, and that there is grave risk of permanent injury and even death in using the nostrums made and sold secretly for this supposed purpose. Castor oil, quinine and other "powerful" drugs merely produce nausea and vomiting without interrupting early pregnancy, while some of the patent medicines sold for the purpose of causing an abortion contain ingredients which act with such violence that hemorrhages in the intestines and kidneys sometimes ensue.

I asked Miss Kempshall if the pregnant girl can usually be persuaded to give up her plan for an abortion.

"If shown another way out, yes," she said. "We haven't had a single case where, if the girl talked to us first, she went through with it. On the other hand, the most touching gratitude I have ever observed has come from girls whom we've held back from abortion."

Pick any congested war center today, and you will find the abortionist fattening on women's desperation. In hectic, youth-packed Washington, D. C., the abortion

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racket is alarming officialdom, the police and the public. Doctor Beatrice Bishop Berle, wife of the Assistant Secretary of State and a member of the medical staff of Gallinger Hospital, declared a few months ago that abortions accounted for 24 per cent of all maternal deaths in the District of Columbia in the past few years.

At police headquarters in Washington, the abortionist file now lists 75 men and women—among them the notorious Edna Gray, a deaf, almost blind, unsanitary old Negress who has been many times arrested, twice convicted, has served two prison terms, and who was indicted again last September on new charges of aborting two white girls.

According to Captain Milliken, head of the Women's Bureau of the Police Department, Edna Gray has for some time been perforating abortions by touch, by blind groping.

Let us contrast briefly one or two frightened young single women who chose the motherhood road, with some who chose Edna Gray.

A Life That Was Saved

Helen, a strictly reared New England girl, met in Washington, D. C., a soldier on leave from his Virginia camp—a boy of good family. He showered her with attentions, and she fell in love with him.

Later the girl found herself pregnant. The boy had returned to his camp in Virginia and had ceased answering her letters. The girl was desperate. To spare her family disgrace, she made an appointment with an abortionist, but a chum implored her to consult a federal medical clinic first. Here the woman physician heading the clinic persuaded Helen to give up the idea of an abortion. Helen's supervisor was confided in, and proved very co-operative. Helen went on working.

Meantime, the medical clinic, at Helen's request, informed the young man. He offered to marry Helen so as to legitimize the child—on condition that she would promise to grant him a divorce after the war. He wasn't sure he wished the marriage to be permanent. Helen agreed to this. They were married, and he returned to camp. She is soon going home to New England to have her baby. He will get leave, just before he goes overseas, and will show up there as her husband. But he promises no more. The girl loves him and hopes to hold him. In any case, she and her child have been saved from the abortionist's butchery.

Rose, a girl of plainer background, was made pregnant by an irresponsible young soldier with whom she had been living as his common-law wife. He had been promising to marry her. But when she told him of her pregnancy, he said he would not. Instead he located a "nice, cheap abortionist" and made an appointment for her. Their landlady, hearing her weeping, inquired and sent her to the medical service in time.

Since the soldier had been passing her off for many months as his common-law wife, Rose could and did obtain a wife's allotment. Thus encouraged, she decided to bear the child. Her whole office had known of her pregnancy, and her office associates, including her woman boss, had been kind. They liked Rose, were sorry, and wanted to help. When the baby was

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about due, the office gave Rose a sick leave with pay, and she bore a fine son. She knew it was best for the child to be placed for adoption; so she gave him up. Now she has returned to her job and is gradually emerging from the experience.

From the Official Records

And now—a contrasting picture, obtained from cold, impersonal court hearings and records regarding a 17-year-old girl who went to Edna Gray instead. We will call the girl Margaret, though the court record bears another name, and the boy we will call Bill. Having made Margaret pregnant, Bill insisted on an abortion by the colored woman. Frightened, confused, ill, the girl consented.

In court she testified: "He took me to her place and she said that what she intended to do would not hurt me much. Then Bill handed the colored woman some money. It appeared to be \$37. She made me lie down on a bed." (The operation was described.) "Bill came in and asked me how I felt. I said, 'Not so good.' He stayed with me that night. I was unable to sleep."

Next noon, the colored woman visited Margaret and repeated the operation, as it had been unsuccessful. The girl's testimony continues: "He took me to a hotel and registered us. I got into bed. He started fussing about all the money he had to spend on me. He said the next girl he went with would have to take care of herself. I got chilled that afternoon and worse, and he called Edna Gray who visited me, giving me quinine and other medicine. She kept giving me medicine. She left.

"The next morning he told me that, because I had moaned all night, it was necessary for us to leave the hotel, and that he had arranged with Edna Gray for me to go to her place again. We went. I suffered terribly all night." (The next morning, the old Negress finally completed the operation with her bare hands.) "I rested several hours. Then I got up, and he got me dark glasses because my eyes were so far back in my head, and we went home. After that, Mother and I reported this matter to the police. Later I identified Edna Gray, who told the police she had never seen me before."

Doctor John Parks, Chief Medical Officer of Obstetrics and Gynecology of Gallinger Hospital, Washington, D. C., said that sometimes girls infected from an abortion are brought into the hospital, screaming. "And some of them die here," he added. "We notice this—that they are being brought here in worse and worse condition. Apparently women are going to worse and worse abortionists. We had only one death here last year. This year we've had a lot more. These women simply couldn't be saved. About one third of our four thousand 1943 abortion cases show infection; and one third of the women have admitted some form of interference. That is, they either tried to produce an abortion themselves, or went to an abortionist. They were brought here with high fever, peritonitis, rupture of the womb."

Sometimes the crippling aftereffects are lasting. Female organs may never return to normal, and the mental shock of a criminal abortion is serious, even if uncomplicated by any physical injuries.

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What is the solution, if any, of the current nation-wide abortion racket? Not, as some propose, legalizing wholesale abortion. This is disastrous, as the Russians discovered. In 1920, Russia removed legal restrictions on abortion. In a few years huge abortaria sprang up in the big cities, and Russian women flocked to them. In Moscow alone, there were 130,000 abortions in 1935.

All these operations were legal. They were performed by experts under sanitary conditions; so the death rate was low. But the rate of pelvic disorders, miscarriages and sterility among these aborted women was appalling. More than forty-three per cent had pelvic disorders of some sort after the abortions. Alarmed, Russia terminated the costly experiments in 1936 by a law forbidding all induced abortions except the very few deemed by a board of physicians to be medically necessary.

The whole intricate problem must be approached from innumerable directions—by parents, educators, youth leaders, family physicians and religious advisers; by government—city, state and national; by social welfare agencies; by enlightened employers from coast to coast; above all, by society, by families and friends of the hard-pressed girls and women apt to be tempted to seek an abortion.

A Need for Education

Certainly one answer, for married women who work and who are tempted to have criminal abortions in order to hold desperately needed jobs, is thorough, countrywide contraceptive education—the spacing of babies, so that the mother can have her child when best equipped to bear it and maintain it. And for all—American women who work, of all races and creeds, there should be provided, immediately, some form of federal maternity insurance including prenatal care during pregnancy, full maternity leave with pay, postnatal care, and free day nurseries for small children of working mothers.

If working wives knew they could not be fired for pregnancy, but would, instead, receive extra care and benefits, the abortion mills near our war plants would largely disappear. These two measures combined—contraceptive instruction together with full maternity insurance—were the solution Russia found and perfected in her long dark road out of her frightening legalized-abortion experiment.

In most sections of the United States today, birth-control information may be freely given by physicians and clinics. In a few states, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, dissemination of contraceptive information is still illegal.

THE END

Collier's for January 22, 1944

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