

THE REAL COST OF ABORTION



Its price is \$150,000,000 a year in money. But the cost in mental anguish is untold

BY LEWIS THOMPSON

An attractive young woman stood waiting nervously on a street corner in Washington, D. C. She was well-dressed and carried a small canvas bag. A taxi pulled up beside her. The driver leaned out and said, "Did you hail a cab, lady?"

The girl stared at him for a moment, then nodded. "Yes," she said, almost whispering. "I want to see the—cherry blossoms."

The driver swung the door open. "They're in bloom," he answered. The girl got into the taxi, which sped down broad Constitution Avenue.

This was no cloak-and-dagger melodrama. It really happened—and happens every day.

She, like hundreds of other women, was on her way to a criminal abortion.

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AN ESTIMATED 1,000,000 criminal abortions are performed in this country every year. They result in countless deaths.

Many of these operations are performed in filthy back rooms by unskilled, unschooled abortionists who may charge as little as \$10. A great many more are performed by bona fide doctors in private hideaways under fairly good conditions. Some cost as much as \$2000. The average price is \$400 to \$500.

But regardless of cost, abortions are dangerous, and they are unlawful. Every state has laws forbidding abortion, and convicted abortionists have paid large fines, gone to jail, and in cases where death has occurred, have been convicted of manslaughter.

While all the states have provi-

sions for legal therapeutic abortions to save lives, legal abortions, according to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, are merely the tiny part of the iceberg that shows above the water. Underneath lies the huge bulk of illegal operations.

Because of the furtive nature of these operations, all facts on abortion are largely speculative. But there is agreement on one surprising fact. Contrary to popular belief—that abortions are performed mainly on young, unmarried, “wayward” women—authorities say that a large majority of all criminal abortions are performed on *married* women, especially between the ages of 25 and 35, with three or more children.

The illegal abortion racket is as lucrative as it is ugly. The total unlawful take in America for abortions is estimated at \$150,000,000 a year.

That is the price in money. But abortion costs much more than mere dollars. The cost in anguish—mental as well as physical—cuts deeper and lasts longer.

Here, for instance, is a case history which illuminates the *real* price: the story of one woman’s abortion. It tells perhaps better than statistics what abortion means.

ON A SPRING afternoon in 1957, Agnes phoned her doctor. After talking with him she hung up slowly and tried to collect her thoughts.

“I’ve received the report on your pregnancy test,” the doctor had said. “It’s positive. You’re going to have a baby.”

With the doctor’s words still ringing in her ears, Agnes dialed her husband’s office number. Gordon loved her, she knew, as much as she loved him. But even as she waited to tell him what the doctor had said, a dark thought shot through her mind: the last thing Gordon wanted at what he called “this stage” of his career was a child.

In discussing her case recently, Agnes, a straightforward young woman with blonde good looks, had earnestly defended her husband’s

feelings at the time.

Gordon was twenty-six, two years older than Agnes. He was working at a small salary for an investment firm and taking courses at night for his master's degree in business administration. Their financial situation was far from good, even though Agnes earned \$80 a week as a stenographer. Gordon still helped to support his parents. But he had assured Agnes that when he got his degree in another couple of years, good jobs would open up for him, things would ease up, and then they would be able to have children.

But now, thought Agnes as she phoned Gordon, now things were changed. She told him what the doctor had said. When she hung up, Agnes noticed that her hand was shaking.

Later, when she opened the door to him, he managed to smile through the lines of worry that creased his face. For hours they sat trying to talk calmly. Gordon did most of the talking.

"We must be sensible," Agnes remembers him saying. "If we have a baby now, we'll be poor and miserable. I'd have to give up my degree. Agnes, we *must* get through this somehow. Then we can stick to our plans, and we'll have children later."

But right now . . . Gordon shook his head. He saw no way out except for Agnes to have an abortion.

Agnes agreed with him in her "mind," as she puts it. "But in another part of me," she says, "I remember looking at him in a new way. He was the father of the baby I was carrying, and we had something new and precious to share. I tried to reach him, to tell him this. But I never got through to him, and his 'logic' won out. I agreed to have an abortion."

DURING THE NEXT two weeks Agnes lived in an atmosphere that was tinged with a feeling of evil. Gordon was trying to arrange for the abortion. He found it terribly difficult in New York to get hold of a physician willing to perform it.

"All this made me feel sordid and

hopeless," she remembers bitterly. "I kept wishing Gordon would come to me and say we couldn't go through with it—that we'd take our chances and have the baby. But he didn't. 'You're upset,' he told me, 'but you'll be okay as soon as it's over.' "

Only a few people knew of Agnes' trouble. One was her best friend Elise, who went with her when she had the abortion. After tortuous negotiations, Gordon finally had found a doctor who would perform it.

It had been arranged through a friend of a friend of Gordon's. Gordon was never given any way to contact the doctor directly. Instead, the doctor called him, several times, and asked him a lot of questions.

"I suppose," says Agnes, "that all of this was to protect the doctor's identity. His price was five hundred dollars; Gordon borrowed the money from a bank. The doctor gave Gordon only one instruction to relay to me: On the night before the abortion, I was to go to my own doctor and get a shot of penicillin."

Agnes had read of girls who had died during abortions and had heard of others left sterile. She blurted out her fears to Gordon and told him she didn't think she could go through with it.

"As I look back," she says now, "I know that my fears were real. But I was also using them as a last-ditch weapon in an unconscious struggle to protect my child. But Gordon dealt with my fears only on their face value, he did his best to convince me there would be no danger, that the doctor was absolutely reliable, and that I had nothing to worry about."

On Thursday night she got her penicillin shot. Gordon offered to go with her the following day.

"But I said no," she recalls. "I just didn't want him around then."

The next afternoon, Elise met Agnes and they took a taxi to the doctor's "office." Actually, it wasn't an office, but a ground-floor apartment in an old gray building in a modest neighborhood. There was no doctor's plate on the outside of the

building, nor on the door to the apartment itself.

“Elise and I were admitted,” Agnes says, “by a presentable woman who nodded when I gave her my name. I gathered she was the doctor’s nurse, although she wore no uniform. She led us down a long hallway and seated us in what I took to be a reception room. ‘You can pay me,’ she said.”

Agnes handed over the money. The nurse counted it, bade Agnes wait a moment, and disappeared.

The furnishings in the room were adequate, but drab. Agnes remembers them only vaguely, but she remembers vividly her mental state.

“As I sat there,” she says, “this thought struck me: How I wish I were visiting an obstetrician instead! I felt panic and guilt. I am carrying a child, I told myself, and in a matter of minutes the child will be taken from me. I had an impulse to run from the place. But at that moment the nurse reappeared. ‘This way, please,’ she said, and I followed her.”

Agnes was led into a room which smelled faintly of antiseptic, and the nurse instructed her to remove certain of her clothes. She did so numbly, hardly aware of what she was about, for her attention was transfixed first by an examination table in the middle of the room and then by a glass cabinet against the wall.

IN THE CABINET were arrayed a variety of gleaming instruments. Two of them caught Agnes’ frightened gaze. One looked to her like a pair of tongs and the other a long-handled spoon. Later she learned that they were, respectively, a dilator and a curette, the basic instruments used in an abortion.

The nurse handed her a pill and a glass of water. Agnes assumed that the pill was an antibiotic, swallowed it, and washed it down. Then the nurse got her on the table, gave her an injection in the thigh, and put her feet in the stirrups.

“I suppose,” says Agnes, “that the injection was some sort of soporific, for presently I felt drowsy. I was



aware of the doctor entering the room. I heard water running in a basin, and I gathered he was washing his hands. Then he approached me. He said almost nothing that I remember, and in a few minutes, it seemed, it was over. I felt stabs of pain, but as if from a distance and through a thick fog.

“Long afterward, I wondered briefly why I had not been given a complete anesthetic, but the answer was obvious. No abortionist wants to run the risk of having an unconscious woman on his premises in case of a visit from the police.”

The nurse helped Agnes off the table and into another room, where she lay down on a couch. About every five minutes, the nurse returned and asked how she felt. Finally, the nurse appeared with Elise, to whom she gave instructions concerning what should be done for Agnes during the next few days.

Then the nurse said they could leave. She led them through a couple of rooms they had not seen before, opened a door, and they found themselves in an outside corridor quite a distance from where they had entered. Agnes guessed that other “patients” had arrived at the apartment since her coming, but that the layout was such that no one woman would encounter another. The devious, furtive character of the abortionist’s “assembly-line” technique intensified her disgust.

Over the week end, Agnes experienced discomfort and some actual pain, but ultimately she suffered no lasting physical injury, and she supposes, therefore, that the abortionist was technically competent. However, the shock and damage to her emotions were enormous. To this day, she believes she is still feeling the effects.

On that first week end after the operation, Agnes fell into a severe depression unparalleled in her entire life. The surgical cessation of her pregnancy had certain glandular results that threw her off balance. But what she felt went far beyond any chemical explanation. It was a great psychological and spiritual emptiness — as though she'd lost something of immense meaning that could never be replaced. Part of her womanhood, her reason for being alive, had been taken from her, and she felt a vast sense of deprivation.

“At the same time, self-loathing set in,” Agnes says. “I thought of the old Bible word ‘unclean.’ I had degraded myself and betrayed my baby. I felt I could never again look at myself in the mirror.”

The first time she and Gordon discussed it, she became hysterical.

Gordon did his utmost, Agnes is sure, to make up for what he now seemed to recognize as having been a deeply disturbing experience for her. Yet the abortion changed things between them. Before, there had been just the two of them in their private world, planning for the future. Now there was another factor: the child they might have had.

“Put simply,” she declares, “I guess I have never forgiven him for letting me down. I remembered my failure when I tried to make him understand that we ought to have the baby. From there, it was easy to go on to the idea that, in his deepest feelings, he just didn't care. If he had really loved me, I told myself, he would not have been so ‘practical.’ For one thing, he would not have exposed me to the dangers of the shoddy, criminal abortion I had undergone.

“But further than that, the child we might have had was infinitely more important than temporary inconvenience, or even poverty. In my mind, the baby was all mixed up with my love for Gordon, and to have had it would have been the most important thing in the world. But to Gordon the baby had noth-

ing to do with our love. I could not forgive him for that.”

It took several months for a break between Agnes and Gordon to develop, but Agnes knew she had to make it. For quite a while after the abortion, there was of course no question of their resuming sexual relations. But when Agnes was well over the physical effects of the operation, Gordon became impatient and Agnes realized she had to face the issue. When she examined her thoughts honestly at that time, she recalls, she knew that the very idea of further intimacy with him brought back only the dreadful atmosphere of her weeks of torment.

Gordon was astonished, shocked and hurt, but she was sure of her course. She told him that they had to separate—at least for a while, perhaps permanently.

“Maybe, in my subconscious,” Agnes reflects, “I hoped that by getting rid of Gordon I could also get rid of my feelings of guilt, frustration and depression. If so, that has not been the case.

“I don’t want to exaggerate my position. I do a good day’s work, I have many friends, and in general I lead what is considered a happy life. By and large, perhaps it is. Yet I know I’ve undergone an experience I’ll never stop regretting as long as I live.”

Agnes does not understand the mysterious force that is called the maternal instinct, but she knows what happens to her at the most unexpected moments. Perhaps she turns a corner and sees a mother trundling her baby along in a stroller. A flutter comes to her stomach and a small stab to her heart. She might have had such a baby, she tells herself, and she gazes after the mother and child with longing and envy.

“I have awakened in the middle of the night,” she says, “and given myself over to what some might call morbid thoughts. I think of my unborn child, of what it might have been like, and I live vicariously the

small joys of motherhood. Maybe someday I'll be able to take Gordon back. He still doesn't understand. Perhaps someday, too, the pain of remorse will stop, and the aching sense of loss will fade. On that day, I think. I'll deserve motherhood." ■■

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