



## Features

### Chroniques

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# Abortion and our changing society

Douglas Waugh, MD

Whenever I am tempted to believe that society's attitudes don't change and that life is simply a replay of the same phenomena and ideas, I find myself brought up short by something that forces me to accept that attitudes can indeed be transformed over time.

I began thinking about this after reading a clipping on Statistics Canada's latest data on abortion. I doubt that any other topic reveals just how much society, and medicine for that matter, have been transformed over time.

When I was a medical student in the early '40s, and for a considerable time after that, the artificial termination of pregnancy was considered an unspeakable crime. These attitudes held even though we all knew that more-or-less respectable women were having abortions performed by more-or-less respectable physicians.

No one knew for certain how widespread the practice was, but enough patients turned up in emergency departments or in the morgue for us to know it was going on, and to arouse the ire and indignation of society's moralists.

The abortion issue also affected the way we thought. One of my classmates at McGill announced that the minute he earned a little money after starting to practise, he was going to open a special bank account containing \$500 that would provide insurance "just in case I get some girl into trouble."

I doubt that many of us emulated him, but I do know that several classmates admired his foresight. His declaration simply voiced one of the double standards of the day. It would never have occurred to any of us to report him for "conspiring to procure an abortion," which was the phrase newspapers of the day favoured.

Abortion was legalized in 1969, and since then Statistics Canada has recorded a steady rise in the number of therapeutic abortions. It wasn't until 1994 that the numbers showed signs of levelling off, at 15.5 abortions per 1000 females aged 15 to 44; that was up slightly from the 1993 rate of 15.3. A little more than half of the 1994 abortions involved women in their 20s; the average age was 26, with 1 in 5 women being under 20.

Although I had expected that the recession of the early '90s would have seen more married women seeking abortions, the reverse turned out to be true: only 21% of abortions involved married women in 1994, down from 31% a decade earlier.

These numbers, and our openness in discussing them, reflect a drastic change in societal attitudes. Nowhere is this more strikingly illustrated than in the Yellow Pages, which now contain a heading called Abortion Services. In Ottawa there are 5 listings, including 1 for the local Morgentaler clinic. As I read down the list, I began to realize how wide a chasm society has crossed.

The credit for bringing the revolution about certainly belongs to Dr. Henry Morgentaler, but it is clear that Canada's social climate had been changing slowly for several years before he defied the law by opening his first abortion clinic in Montreal.

The change in attitude occurred after court challenges to his clinic proved unsuccessful. True, the anti-abortion campaign is not yet dead, but its force has become so attenuated the impact is limited.

This remarkable social transformation took place within a few years. The topic we had discussed *sotto voce* in medical school is now advertised in the phone book.

When Winston Churchill said that the "mill of justice grinds very slow, but it grinds exceedingly fine," I doubt he had abortion in mind. If he had, he might have added "when the time is ripe," as it finally was in the case of abortion. ?