

The Abortion Act's paternalism belongs to the 1960s

Women, not doctors, should decide whether they need an abortion

Sally Sheldon

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 22 March 2012 15.46 GMT



The abortion drug mifepristone. Photograph: Phil Walter/Getty Images

The [Abortion Act 1967](#) was introduced in response to widespread evidence of unsafe illegal [abortion](#) and the maternal mortality and morbidity that inevitably result (while many of us are too young to remember the reality of this in the UK, unsafe illegal abortions cause [47,000 deaths](#) worldwide each year). Those fighting for reform in the 1960s painted a vivid and tragic picture of the women they wished to help, listing drug addicts, alcoholics, women who already had several children and who were incapable of coping with another, and those whose husbands were violent drunkards, in prison, or otherwise absent or inadequate. Opponents of decriminalisation took a different view, tending to describe women who might wish to terminate a pregnancy as selfish, irrational, immature and needing to be forced to take responsibility for their actions.

Both sides of this highly polarised debate found common ground in the view that women were not the best people to make the important decision of whether to continue a pregnancy. Rather, women should be encouraged into [doctors'](#) surgeries, where they might be counselled, supported and, only if the doctor deemed appropriate, granted access to abortion. In the 45 years since it was passed, doctors have tended towards a more liberal interpretation of the Abortion Act, with the result that access to abortion has become easier. However, doctors remain formally charged with making abortion decisions even, as in the vast majority of cases, where the request for abortion is not grounded primarily in medical factors.

In abortion, the legal role of the doctor goes far beyond what we would expect for other medical procedures. Elsewhere, the clinician's duties are typically limited to providing clear and balanced advice about medical risks and offering the opportunity to talk through any concerns in an impartial and supportive environment. While the [recent Telegraph 'sting'](#) focussed on whether current restrictions on abortion are being applied in practice, it should also remind us of the fundamental question of whether such restrictions remain appropriate in a world which has otherwise moved beyond the 'doctor knows best' paternalism (and underpinning assumptions of female inadequacy) which characterised medical practice in the 1960s.

This is not to deny, of course, that abortions are different from other medical procedures. Abortion involves deliberately ending a potential human life. And while most

of us do not accept that the foetus is a full moral person of equal status to the pregnant woman, many of us nonetheless believe that embryonic human life is of moral significance. Second, abortion decisions differ from many other medical decisions in a further profound way in that they often require deep reflection on the shape of one's future life (could I cope with a child right now? Would we be good parents?).

Yet while these differences are real and important, they do not provide a good basis for denying female autonomy in this most personal of decisions and maintaining the current legal regulation of abortion. Indeed, the fact that termination decisions are serious, with potentially far-reaching implications, might appear all the more reason for believing that it is women who must make them. Contrary to the assumptions which underpin the current legal framework, women are more likely to agonise over abortion decisions and are far better placed to understand the implications for themselves and their families. It is these women, moreover, who live with the consequences of any choice made.

We came close to achieving a better law in 2008, when reforming MPs proposed a number of changes to modernise the Abortion Act. One amendment foresaw the removal of the requirement of medical approval for all but late terminations. However, the Brown government torpedoed any debate of liberalising reform, allegedly because blocking democratic debate of the proposal to extend the Abortion Act to Northern Ireland was the necessary quid pro quo for the Democratic Unionist Party's support for the introduction of 42 days detention without charge. While politicians denied women's reproductive rights were being used as bargaining chips in a backroom deal, the episode revealed scant concern for the right of a democratically elected Parliament to debate a matter of profound importance and significant controversy.

The result is the retention of legislation grounded in tired stereotypes of women's inability to make important decisions in a serious and reflective way. It would be lamentable if one consequence of the fictitious abortion requests made by the Telegraph were to add fuel to this view, implying that real women's requests for abortion are frivolous or unconsidered.

Ads by Google

Texas Holiday Deals 2012

Experience the scenery and indulge Yourself in Southern Hospitality

www.traveltex.com/ukpromo

Plus500™UK Online trading

Stocks\Forex\Indexes\ETF\Oil Etc. No fees, Free Demo, £150 Bonus!

www.Plus500.co.uk

Malo Cashmere

The New Spring Summer Collection 2012 is Now Available. Shop Online!

store.malo.it/en_EU

Comments

172 comments, displaying first

 Staff

 Contributor

Comments on this page are now closed.



springtulip

22 March 2012 3:56PM

We need abortion on demand. It is ridiculous that a woman's access to abortion depends on the personal beliefs of her GP. This creates a postcode lottery in which women face unacceptable barriers and delays in accessing the services they need.

Recommend (87)

Responses (2)

Report

Clip | [Link](#)

**JuliaBtS**

22 March 2012 4:05PM

Couldn't agree more.

Recommend (52)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)Clip | [Link](#)**CAJStuart**

22 March 2012 5:29PM

Unfortunately, Paternalism is alive and well and running/ruining the world...

Recommend (34)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)Clip | [Link](#)**caramel10**

22 March 2012 5:35PM

How are we ever going to achieve equality whilst men think it is ok to make women's decision for them? And we sacrificed women's rights so we can more aggressively erode human rights by introducing the 42 days detention without charge act?

The mind boggles.....

Recommend (41)

Responses (3)

[Report](#)Clip | [Link](#)**Pagey**

22 March 2012 6:30PM

The Act does need reform, to remove the clause where a Disabled foetus can be aborted up to full term. Do you think we Disabled people cannot feel pain or something - or are we just lesser humans?

Recommend (35)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)Clip | [Link](#)**Brainhead**

22 March 2012 8:20PM

Response to [caramel10, 22 March 2012 5:35PM](#)

And we sacrificed women's rights so we can more aggressively erode human rights by introducing the 42 days detention without charge act?

You're aware that this was dropped by the Lords, yeah?

Recommend (6)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)Clip | [Link](#)**Brainhead**

22 March 2012 8:21PM

Response to [caramel10, 22 March 2012 5:35PM](#)

And we sacrificed women's rights so we can more aggressively erode human rights by introducing the 42 days detention without charge act?

And that there's no such thing as the '42 Days Detention Without Charge Act'?

Recommend (7)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)Clip | [Link](#)**Brainhead**

22 March 2012 8:22PM

Response to [caramel10, 22 March 2012 5:35PM](#)

And we sacrificed women's rights so we can more aggressively erode human rights by introducing the 42 days detention without charge act?

Recommend (11)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)Clip | [Link](#)

For that matter, at what point did we A. Sacrifice women's rights, and at what point did this result in B. Result in the whole 42 days detention thing?

That's it now, I think.



Paul923

22 March 2012 9:05PM

There should be no time limit on abortion - it is paternalistic, oppressive and anti-feminist. I think women should be able to terminate the lives of their children until the point at which the child leaves the body (alive) without facing prosecution.

Recommend (19)

Responses (3)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



springtulip

22 March 2012 10:40PM

Response to [Paul923, 22 March 2012 9:05PM](#)

I completely agree. Unless we're considering a situation in which late-term fetuses are induced early and allowed to take their chances at survival as an alternative to abortion, viability is completely irrelevant to the abortion debate. If I withdraw consent to having something inside my body, it should be removed immediately. It makes no difference whether the thing inside me is an embryo or a baby - my body is my body and I am not obliged to share it with anyone.

Recommend (29)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



GregCallus

23 March 2012 2:20AM

I don't at all disagree with the author that doctors have no place in the ethical decision-making process, and I can't imagine anyone who supports a right to choose thinking that this is a good use of the NHS. No reason for any external fetters on a woman choosing whether or not to have a termination.

That said, isn't abortion a medical procedure? Might there not be decent regulatory reasons for oversight that have nothing to do with paternalism? If it were completely out of the remit of doctors to approve, might there not be a small number of deaths etc from complications with rare conditions etc etc?

These are genuine questions - it might be that having an abortion is medically no more significant than taking aspirin, in which case, I'd fully support removing the doctor requirement. However, even an early stage medical abortion using mifepristone requires a cocktail of drugs that should surely be assessed against a patient's medical record.

There's no prescription drug that can be taken without medical 'approval'. I'd fully support keeping doctors out of life choices generally, but I'm not quite sure they should be kept out of any medical choices, whatever the politics.



Recommend (18)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



Paul923

23 March 2012 3:20AM

Actually, I might be in favour of extending the term during which the child can be terminated until a few months after birth. This

Recommend (10)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)

way you can get a better idea of whether or not you wish to keep him or her. Your baby, your choice.



LucianOfSamosata

23 March 2012 7:04AM

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see [our FAQs](#).



vastariner

23 March 2012 8:31AM

Response to [springtulip, 22 March 2012 3:56PM](#)

We need abortion on demand.

Says someone who wasn't aborted.

The problem with the whole abortion debate is it seems to centre around a woman's rights to do what she wants with her body, with next to no consideration for what's growing there. The law is meant to protect the weak against the strong - and what could be weaker than an embryo?

The Human Rights Act is about balancing exercises, one person's right to make a living versus another person's right to have a peaceful home, one person's right to privacy against another person's right to free speech, and so on. The abortion debate never seems to apply this sort of balance (and I appreciate that an embryo is not considered a human under the HRA), but surely there is a point to be considered about the woman's state being balanced against an embryo's viability and likely life expectancy? Abortion because of severe trauma, a serious health risk, rape and many other cases is one thing, but one "on demand", which could include for example going into a hospital at 6 months and asking for an abortion because the mother is worried the baby could be ginger, is at least arguably wrong and not to be encouraged.

[Recommend \(30\)](#)

[Responses \(3\)](#)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



snowcat3

23 March 2012 9:21AM

Response to [vastariner, 23 March 2012 8:31AM](#)

Your "I'm worried this baby could be ginger" is a classic illustration of what the article talks about : this insulting attitude that women undertake abortion for irrational and immature reasons.

Come on, admit it : you've never heard of a case where someone has actually done that, have you ?

You are doing the usual thing of invoking the embryo.

I'd be delighted if all the embryo-champions out there devoted half as much time and energy to championing the weak who are among us : the disabled, the poor, the homeless. Also women who are suffering the effects of rape. When THESE people are bearing the brunt of government policies, and encountering general indifference and worse in the community, the so-called pro-life

[Recommend \(81\)](#)

[Responses \(2\)](#)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

lobby are nowhere to be seen.

Cue for someone to come on here and say that they donate baby clothes or put some money in a charity tin. This is not the same thing at all as working towards justice.



springtulip

23 March 2012 9:59AM

Response to [vastariner](#), 23 March 2012 8:31AM

The Human Rights Act is about balancing exercises, one person's right to make a living versus another person's right to have a peaceful home, one person's right to privacy against another person's right to free speech, and so on. The abortion debate never seems to apply this sort of balance (and I appreciate that **an embryo is not considered a human under the HRA**), but surely there is a point to be considered about the woman's state being balanced against an embryo's viability and likely life expectancy? Abortion because of severe trauma, a serious health risk, rape and many other cases is one thing, but one "on demand", which could include for example going into a hospital at 6 months and asking for an abortion because the mother is worried the baby could be ginger, is at least arguably wrong and not to be encouraged.

I think you explained the situation yourself. The human rights act is designed to protect people, not embryos, and abortion does protect people. Abortion is a vastly safer option than continued pregnancy and childbirth in all cases (do some research on the devastating consequences that normal, 'healthy' pregnancies have on a woman's body if you don't believe this), which is why it is a necessary part of women's healthcare, and one which we should not be denied access to for any reason.

Recommend (46)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



vastariner

23 March 2012 10:07AM

Response to [snowcat3](#), 23 March 2012 9:21AM

Your "I'm worried this baby could be ginger" is a classic illustration of what the article talks about : this insulting attitude that women undertake abortion for irrational and immature reasons.

Come on, admit it : you've never heard of a case where someone has actually done that, have you ?

There was the cleft palate one. The point is that "on demand" would allow that - and would allow abortion for no reason whatsoever.

Recommend (11)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



Kinders

23 March 2012 10:22AM

I appreciate the points you're making, but the suggestion that doctors' approval is equal to paternalism betrays an accidental

Recommend (15)

Responses (2)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)

sexism: who says all doctors are male?

Surely it is metricocracy, not patriarchy, that argues doctors should play such a significant part in this decision?



Kinders

23 March 2012 10:24AM

metricocracy/meritocracy, tomahto/tomayto

Recommend (3)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



Liverpoollife

23 March 2012 10:35AM

Response to [Kinders, 23 March 2012 10:22AM](#)

If you look at the way that junior doctors are trained you will see that paternalism is alive and well.

Any meritocracy that we do have is predicated on the individual conforming to a certain set of values.

Recommend (12)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



warbler

23 March 2012 11:48AM

This morning we have this:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/mar/23/abortion-forms-pre-signed-spot-checks>

Whilst it is bad practice for anyone to sign a form in advance when it should relate to an event that has been agreed on, I am highly concerned that we have a creeping anti-abortion agenda appearing in this country. This is not the first story if its juld to appear recently and it would be interesting to know whether this is wide-spread or whether it is one story and is being used to fuel anger at abortions. Nadine Dorries and her right-wing ('christian?') crusade may be gaining ground.

It will be a disaster if the UK follows the United States' line on this topic, just as we are doing with our health services. Not only would it affect women seeking abortion but is a step on a road to even greater paternalism than that mentioned in this article which will start to affect women in all fields, something that must be resisted strongly.

Recommend (44)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



GaryBaldie

23 March 2012 11:50AM

There was a study published in the British Journal of Psychology last year, conducted by Dr Priscilla Coleman, apparently showing medical termination to be a causal factor in a variety of post-procedural mental health disorders. It found that, overall, women who have undergone an abortion are 81% more likely to suffer subsequent psychological traumas - including anxiety, depression and serious substance abuse - than those who have not.

Is it possible that current practices are failing women by trending towards permissive, rather than prohibitive, attitudes? I don't mean to suggest that abortion ought to be outlawed, of course, but it's hard to escape the suspicion that women such as those highlighted in Dr Coleman's study; women living *but not coping*

Recommend (8)

Responses (2)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)

with the consequences of their choice, have been failed by the existing processes. Could a greater degree of clinical intervention remedy this problem? Do the findings of the study evidence the suggestion of conflicting interest raised in last year's Dorries amendment?

This argument is really only ever conducted in the parlance of women's rights vs. foetal rights, an argument that roughly divides between liberal and conservative. But isn't there an argument to be had as to whether a woman's right to her own body might, in some cases, jeopardise her right to a healthy mind?



Malchemy

23 March 2012 12:31PM

If you are against abortion for moral or religious reasons please remember that no one wants to make you have one, so now you can relax and move on to something less stressful.

Recommend (50)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



responsibilitywithou

23 March 2012 12:35PM

Response to [snowcat3](#), 23 March 2012 9:21AM

Hm.You take offence at the suggestion that any woman could "undertake abortion for irrational and immature reasons".

Recommend (9)

Responses (2)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)

Wow.Could you name any other field of human activity-say religion,marrriage,the use of guns,driving a car-in which British men and women always act for motives which are rational and mature?

If not,might it not just be that you are merely making this statement to support your case?If so,you might want to argue:

- (1)Motherhood is sacred to Woman
- (2)All women are at their most caring and rational when it comes to looking after their kiddies.
- (3)Therefore they could only ever do something which might,to some,seem a bit not nice for the very best of reasons.



HeartoftheWoods

23 March 2012 12:38PM

Response to [GaryBaldie](#), 23 March 2012 11:50AM

Fergusson et al. Produced a series of studies on the issue of abortion and mental health in the years 2006-2009, and they found the same- that abortion overall contributes to worse mental health. However, they went back and did further study to find out why this was.

What they discovered was that there was absolutely no correlation between having had an abortion and ill mental health in the cases where the woman felt having the abortion was the correct choice. That accounts for about 90% of cases. If the woman had an abortion but did not feel that it was the correct choice, then yes, their chances of mental illness increased.

I don't believe abortion itself is responsible for these mental

Recommend (42)

Responses (2)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)

illnesses- rather, it is a lack of support that many women face when requesting and receiving an abortion from the wider world. There are few conversations had about abortion, and if a woman feels her abortion maybe wasn't the best choice there is a scarcity of places where she can discuss this without fear of being branded a selfish murderer.

I trust women- any woman- to have thought her abortion through more than I will. I think, yes, there should be mental health support more prominently and permanently in place, so that women can talk through their decisions without being judged or pressured, before or after the abortion itself- her call.

But the bottom line is- I trust women to have thought this through.

Please note- I do not think a comment thread is the best place to discuss the scientific findings of mental health and abortion. The field is dominated by studies funded by anti-choice organisations that masquerade as proper science- it's very easy to cite anti-abortion statistics, and the good science that focusses on the real weight of the abortion decision are easily lost.



nansikom

23 March 2012 1:07PM

From the very useful and well annotated '[Historical abortion statistics, United Kingdom](#)':

Figures for total abortions (legal and illegal) by UK residents:

1960: 2,070
 1965: 19,521
 1970: 81,812
 1975: 115,678
 1980: 139,548
 1985: 152,640
 1990: 186,737
 1995: 167,297
 2000: 197,366
 2005: 200,495

Over broadly this period the UK population rose from 52.8 million in 1961 to 59.0 million in 2001.

Are you sure that you still want to go with:

'implying that real women's requests for abortion are frivolous or unconsidered'.

when the number of abortions has increased by around 200,000 between 1960 and 2005, a period during which people's levels of education, living standards and access to contraception increased tremendously.

Recommend (14)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



CentralBelter

23 March 2012 1:10PM

Response to [HeartoftheWoods, 23 March 2012 12:38PM](#)

<The field is dominated by studies funded by anti-choice organisations that masquerade as proper science- it's very easy to cite anti-abortion statistics, and the good science that focusses on the real weight

Recommend (13)

Responses (2)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

of the abortion decision are easily lost./blockquote>

Absolutely. And the studies often deliberately confuse the distinction between sadness or regret and mental illness. Some women feel sad after an abortion, and a some regret it eventually: but that's about being an adult and taking responsibility for your decisions. Sometimes offers of 'support' have the effect of persuading women they should be traumatised...



CentralBelter

23 March 2012 1:16PM

Response to [responsibilitywithou](#), 23 March 2012 12:35PM

Hm.You take offence at the suggestion that any woman could "undertake abortion for irrational and immature reasons".

Wow.Could you name any other field of human activity-say religion,marriage,the use of guns,driving a car-in which British men and women always act for motives which are rational and mature?

It's true, lots of our decisions are taken for complex and strange reasons. But we don't stop people divorcing because they may have married for frivolous reasons. People live with the consequences of their decisions: that's what being an adult is all about. The current law doesn't treat women as adults.

Recommend (19)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



HeartoftheWoods

23 March 2012 1:22PM

Response to [CentralBelter](#), 23 March 2012 1:10PM

Sometimes offers of 'support' have the effect of persuading women they should be traumatised...

That's very true. I think half the problem is that there are opponents of abortion access who feel so strongly about the issue that they use unethical tactics- such as intimidation, outright scientific lies, terrorist firebombings and assassinations- in pursuit of what they see as a greater ethical goal, the removal of women's option of legal abortion. There's a sort of pincer movement, where on one hand there are greater and greater restrictions put on women's ability to functionally receive an abortion, whether it's crowds of violent protesters or unnecessary legislation, and on the other there's still a grand push for making abortion illegal again.

I don't think that an attempt to groom women who have had and do regret an abortion into mouthpieces for the movement is beyond a lot of anti-choice organisations- you're right there. Any offer of support after the fact would have to be carefully monitored to make sure it wasn't pushing any agenda other than the mental health of the woman involved.

Recommend (9)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



helenamay

23 March 2012 1:23PM

Response to [vastariner](#), 23 March 2012 8:31AM

Nonsense. An embryo is not a person and shouldn't be balanced

Recommend (32)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)

against anything. This sanctity of life business gets my goat. Especially when human beings are being killed and mistreated the world over. Compared with the horror of very real human rights abuses, your 'ginger' argument is so frivolous as to be offensive (and shows that you know little or nothing about why and how women choose to abort pregnancies or indeed pregnancy itself).



[londonsupergirl](#)

23 March 2012 1:23PM

Response to [CentralBelter, 23 March 2012 1:10PM](#)

Spot on.

And yet the fact that actually having children (ie NOT having the abortion) means that a woman runs a very high risk of developing a temporary or permanent mentally illness, from 'maternity blues' (up to 75% of all new mothers), full-blown postpartum depression (up to 15% of all new mothers) to postpartum psychosis (one in perhaps 500 of all new mothers) -- Sit, Rothschild, Wisner 2006.

Women who have abortions run nowhere near that statistical risk of mental illness.

And this is just for *new* mothers -- it doesn't take into account the mental illness rate of *all* mothers.

[Recommend \(26\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



[nansikom](#)

23 March 2012 1:24PM

Response to [Paul923, 23 March 2012 3:20AM](#)

>>Actually, I might be in favour of extending the term during which the child can be terminated until a few months after birth. This way you can get a better idea of whether or not you wish to keep him or her. Your baby, your choice.<<

I know you're a troll but you do realise that you're advocating premeditated murder, don't you?

[Recommend \(9\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



[nansikom](#)

23 March 2012 1:30PM

Response to [Pagey, 22 March 2012 6:30PM](#)

>>he Act does need reform, to remove the clause where a Disabled foetus can be aborted up to full term. Do you think we Disabled people cannot feel pain or something - or are we just lesser humans?<<

Good point, Pagey, and I agree with you completely! I'm afraid, however, this approach is entirely consistent with the eunucist origins of the abortion industry. If you decide that an unborn child can be aborted purely on the decision of the mother then it logically follows that termination of those deemed to be even less desirable, such as the disabled, should be able to be aborted even more easily.

The underlying philosophy of abortion is very dark indeed. That is why the Catholic Church is right to refer to it as being part of the 'Culture of Death'.

[Recommend \(8\)](#)

[Responses \(3\)](#)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

**wadhamite**

23 March 2012 1:31PM

That said, isn't abortion a medical procedure?...These are genuine questions - it might be that having an abortion is medically no more significant than taking aspirin, in which case, I'd fully support removing the doctor requirement. However, even an early stage medical abortion using mifepristone requires a cocktail of drugs that should surely be assessed against a patient's medical record.

There is a big difference between a doctor saying "I won't prescribe this drug because I am opposed to abortion" and a doctor saying "I won't prescribe this drug because I think it would be dangerous for you to take it, let's find another alternative". A patient needing a chemical or surgical abortion at whatever stage should simply be able to go to an abortion provider, see a healthcare professional there (whether a doctor, nurse etc) and get the safest, most appropriate form of abortion for them - without also needing their doctor to agree with the morality of their decision!

In addition to this - considering how often my GP has tried to prescribe me antibiotics I'm allergic to, I don't actually trust my GP to read my notes. Just because they have Doctor in front of their name doesn't mean they know best!

[Recommend \(15\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)**HeartoftheWoods**

23 March 2012 1:37PM

Response to [nansikom, 23 March 2012 1:30PM](#)

It does not logically follow, actually. If it's all up to the mother then a disabled embryo can be aborted *exactly as easily* as any other embryo.

The way to prevent this happening is to allow abortion as and when a woman demands it and reform our society to actually value women and the disabled, to dismantle the ableist and sexist conceits that underpin the decisions to abort a disabled or female foetus.

The underlying philosophy of my support to abortion is very bright. I believe that you have the right to make decisions about your body. I do not believe the Catholic Church is right to refer to it as the "Culture of Death", and frankly that organisation needs to take a good long look at what it views as unacceptable behaviour towards children before it starts charging in, pennants waving in a righteous, empty wind.

[Recommend \(30\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)**snowcat3**

23 March 2012 1:40PM

Response to [responsibilitywithou, 23 March 2012 12:35PM](#)

Read what Centralbelter has written.

I don't believe that most women undertake what is always a stressful procedure and often a painful one just because they want a ski-ing holiday, or are afraid of looking a bit fat, or because they might give birth to someone with ginger hair or who

[Recommend \(14\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

is left-handed.

It is many people in the anti-abortion lobby who believe that motherhood is a sacred calling and a duty.



gerryt

23 March 2012 1:46PM

I agree abortion is no place for a doctor to be involved. Similarly with euthanasia, which I would expect to be formally legalised in the not too distant future, it is the last place a doctor should be seen. It should be left to state approved abortionists and euthanisers to administer and control and the medical profession should get on with other things.

[Recommend \(3\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



wycliffe

23 March 2012 1:47PM

Response to [Paul923, 22 March 2012 9:05PM](#)

"There should be no time limit on abortion - it is paternalistic, oppressive and anti-feminist"

It was inserting this clause in the National Abortion Campaign's aims back in the 70s which derailed the abortion campaign of those years from achieving its aim: the right for women to choose abortion up to a clearly defined limit when the foetus became viable - theoretically capable of living on its own after miscarriage or abortion.

This clause was deliberately foisted on us by the extreme left groups, which did not wish the abortion campaign to achieve its aims in a short period. Why? Because the abortion campaign mobilised and politicised more women than any other campaign before and the far left saw this as a great chance to pick up some new recruits. As far as they were concerned, the longer the campaign continued, the more women they might find to swell their numbers.

So they cynically rallied a national NAC conference into voting for it, preferring to trade an achievable aim, full woman's right to choose say, up to 16 weeks, for an unachievable aim, abortion rights up to full term. In the event, all we managed to do was to beat down two anti-abortion Bills and keep the status quo, without obtaining abortion at the woman's choice.

The aim of full choice up to term will never be agreed by any Parliament in the foreseeable future and therefore it is a very dangerous cause to adopt. I can think of no MP who would vote for a law which allowed a viable baby child to be aborted at, say, 7, 8 or nearly 9 months gestation. To do so would mean asking medical staff to kill a foetus which has survived the abortion process and is still capable of life.

In France we have abortion at the woman's choice up to 12 weeks' gestation. It's a bit restrictive, and any woman who finds herself pregnant and does not want to continue the pregnancy has to act quickly to get the abortion arranged within the legal time limit. But it works quite well and is accepted by the medical staff who do not have religious objections to abortion before the date of quickening.

[Recommend \(12\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

Please do not forget, dear sisters, one argument which made abortion acceptable to a majority of women back in the 1960s and 1970s was the fact that even the Catholic Church had, in its ancient laws, accepted that a foetus was not equivalent to a human being until it reached the stage of "quickening".

From memory, the Church had its own little sexist rule. A boy child had a soul about 4 weeks earlier than a girl child. Perhaps one of the theologians who will soon be contributing to speak against all abortions can enlighten us about this point in early Church doctrine.

However, attacking abortion clinics on the basis that forms are presigned is not a valid criticism. The Abortion Law requires doctors to decide whether continuing the pregnancy presents more danger than harm to pregnant woman.

In every case, it is more dangerous to continue a pregnancy than to abort, as even today pregnancy presents many dangers for the mother. And with the NHS being sold off to American health firms, no doubt it will soon become even more dangerous to give birth in British hospitals.

The British rate of maternal mortality in the UK in the last available figures (2008) was 8.2 per 100,000 live births, compared with 16.7 in the United States. However, with our wholly nationalised NHS, we were in 23rd place internationally, compared with France in 31st place at 10 deaths per 100,000.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/apr/12/maternal-mortality-rates-millennium-development-goals#data>



coffeetable

23 March 2012 1:51PM

Response to [GaryBaldie](#), 23 March 2012 11:50AM

Utter, disingenuous, offensive rubbish. You go and look for some studies about the mental health of women who have been forced by a repressive state to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term. Anyone who cares about the well-being of women, as you pretend to do, will recognise that having the option to abort an unwanted pregnancy - an option of which no one need take advantage unless they want to - is far, far better for women than any other alternative.

But isn't there an argument to be had as to whether a woman's right to her own body might, in some cases, jeopardise her right to a healthy mind?

This sentence is quite unbelievable. Are you seriously suggesting that a woman should be deprived of rights over her own body because some man thinks that the poor dear will have a 'healthy' mind if she - what - has no control over her body? I hope you're just trolling, but if you seriously think of women in this way, you're a public danger.

Recommend (31)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



snowcat3

23 March 2012 1:51PM

Response to [vastariner](#), 23 March 2012 10:07AM

As I understand it, the cleft palate case was poorly reported. The

Recommend (34)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)

problem was not just a cleft palate (usually easily corrected these days) but far more severe disability which had cleft palate as one of its minor elements.

Ginger hair and severe abnormality are entirely different issues. You referred to ginger hair.

As for disabled children, a lot of them get very little help once born. Disabled children (SOME disabled children, the ones that look cute, or are relatively easy to look after) get sentimentalized, but disabled adults don't even get that. Marriages with a disabled child have a 70% rate of breakdown, and in the great majority of those cases, it is the mother who is left to shoulder the burden of care.

With very little help from the community, I may add. Anyone who is pro-life in any meaningful sense would be rolling up their sleeves to offer assistance.

I am sick and tired of the anti-abortion lobby using disability in their debate. If they're not actively supporting disabled people who actually have been born, they are hypocrites of the worst order.



BlackEyedBlonde

23 March 2012 1:55PM

These mental health studies are incredibly misleading. I'm sure if you carried out a similar study on women who carried a pregnancy to term against their full desire you'd find similar results.

And the argument that some women have "frivolous" reasons for terminating is also pointless. What your idea of flippancy may be could be a very serious issue for the woman behind it - the bottom line is that whatever her reason, it is a reason that makes her decide that she does not want that pregnancy. The reason is irrelevant, if a woman doesn't want a pregnancy then denying her a full range of choice is wrong and will never have a positive outcome.

Recommend (15)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



bluebellnutter

23 March 2012 1:57PM

Saying outright that it should be either person A or person B (either medical professional or woman concerned) on their own is a pointless argument, it should be a combination of the two. Only a woman knows how she feels but only a medical professional can judge on what is safe to do.

BTW do fathers not get a say at all?

Recommend (7)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



wycliffe

23 March 2012 2:00PM

Response to [nansikom](#), 23 March 2012 1:30PM

"The underlying philosophy of abortion is very dark indeed. That is why the Catholic Church is right to refer to it as being part of the 'Culture of Death'."

Perhaps the Catholic Church should do something about its

Recommend (15)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

culture of paedophilia before it starts, as it has done throughout its existence, once again trying to constrain, force and imprison women.

The Magdalene Sisters.

The Albigenian Crusade against Christians who (Horror!) allowed women to be priests.

The P2 Masonic lodge and the Mafia

Helping all those Nazis to escape to South America after they killed millions of (Jewish) children.

The abuse of children in every country where the Catholic Church holds sway, followed by systematic cover-ups by the so-called "Princes of the Church".

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/mar/20/forcible-castrations-dutch-catholic-church/>

Yes, I know, your fingers are itching for the rope and the tinderbox, aren't they? Wasn't it great back in the day when you could just burn women who fought back?

How many millions was it again? Yeah, I really listen with deep humility to the Catholic Church.



coffetable

23 March 2012 2:04PM

The problem with debate is that the anti-abortion lobby are fundamentally dishonest about their motivations, which are solely about the control of women's reproductive capacity and sexual behaviour. The pro-choice position, on the other hand, is honest, straightforward and based in a genuine respect for the autonomy and agency of actual, living, conscious human life. The unborn, unaware foetus is neither here nor there in any of this. This is an argument about the position of women in society and about their autonomy as humans equal in worth and intelligence to men. It has become the site of a major rear-guard action by the forces of social conservatism and patriarchal religions. Women's bodies, as usual, have become the focus for a war of culture and ideology, and, as usual, it will be the minds and bodies of women that pay the price.

The article is absolutely spot on. As long as anyone but the pregnant woman plays any role in deciding what she should do, women are not being treated as equal citizens or human beings with integrity or independent agency. There isn't an anti-abortion argument that has the slightest respect for this consideration. If you do not respect existing life in the form of adult women, which the anti-abortion lobby clearly does not, you cannot pretend that you will do any better with the potential life that is not yet born.

Recommend (18)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



Kyza06

23 March 2012 2:10PM

wycliffe - top posts on this thread, esp the potted history of the 70s movement.

Recommend (4)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

**wycliffe**

23 March 2012 2:11PM

Oh yes, and I was forgetting that other crime the Catholic Church aided and abetted with in Spain: the theft and the redistribution, often for large sums of money, of 300,000 babies, taken from single mothers and leftwing families.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/16/spanish-baby-snatching-accuse-nun>

You know, the more I look into the Catholic Church, the more I think there should be international legislation to stop this organisation having anything whatever to do with children.

And as for advising women whether or not to have children, forget it! After all, who in their right mind would want to give their baby to be kept in a Catholic institution?

I think the figure the Dutch came up with was one in five children abused, wasn't it?

Now that can really be called a culture of darkness.

[Recommend \(16\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)**sallyo57**

23 March 2012 2:23PM

Response to [nansikom](#), 23 March 2012 1:30PM

You're suggesting the Catholic Church should be our moral guide? Really?

Repulsive. And I'm a Catholic.

[Recommend \(14\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)**GaryBaldie**

23 March 2012 2:34PM

Response to [coffeetable](#), 23 March 2012 1:51PM

A bizarre and hysterical response based on ad hominem rather than any critical engagement with the post. For the record, I believe, as an article of faith, that it is vital in civil society to ensure and secure continued access to legal abortions in sterile, clinical and professional surroundings; never did I question that in the original post, and nor would I, under any circumstances. In assuming otherwise, and despite my already having made that point explicitly, you have made a mystifying leap of fallacious logic.

It's telling of how toxic this debate has become that anyone expressing an opinion even slightly at odds with the "liberal" orthodoxy can be written off as a public danger. Presumably that's not your finest contribution to this subject and I'm prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt on that; given the nature of the topic, it's understandable that comments will be made in error from time to time.

As someone who clearly believes passionately in what might be called women's welfare (awful terminology, admittedly), perhaps you can tell me whether or not - bearing in mind that the law, as it relates to current pre-procedural programmes, states one purpose of counselling to be that providers are able to conclude with certainty that the individual in question will not be harmed psychologically by the decision to terminate - those women

[Recommend \(1\)](#)[Responses \(2\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

identified in Dr. Coleman's study, those who have since suffered with anxiety, regret, depression *etc*, as a consequence of their decision, have been failed by current standards of practice?



benliner

23 March 2012 2:35PM

Response to [Paulo23, 22 March 2012 9:05PM](#)

Why until that particular point?

Recommend (1)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)



wycliffe

23 March 2012 2:39PM

Response to [BlackEyedBlonde, 23 March 2012 1:55PM](#)

This slur on women having abortions for frivolous reasons is exactly the same propaganda SPUC was spouting 40 years ago.

In those days SPUC speakers always referred to blondes in sports cars as choosing abortion so that they could continue with their madcap lifestyle.

I am old enough to have met women who aborted in the most terrible ways before legal abortion was possible. And you know what, in every case they had done it, often risking their lives, because they knew that to have the child was to be unable to bring it up with dignity and love.

Once, just after the revolution which liberated Portugal I went to Lisbon to attend an abortion conference. There I met a woman with four living children who had endured 16 illegal, life-threatening abortions. This was in a country where contraception was totally illegal. Why? It was a Catholic country, of course. This poor woman had done that 16 times because otherwise she would not have been able to feed and clothe the children she already had.

If you really think abortion is bad, you could probably stop a fair number of abortions by these simple procedures:

1. Provide a family allowance for every child which will cover its needs for food and clothing.
2. Provide full State nursery care for children from the age of 3 years old, as we have in France. (One of the reasons French birth rates are very healthy.) Also give tax credits to women who pay childminders for children below the age of 3.
3. Legislate so that employers cannot sack or downgrade women who take maternity leave. (Some of you may recall the horrors visited on that doctor in a northern NHS region after taking maternity leave)
4. Legislate so that women's careers do not systematically suffer from the fact they are physically capable of having children (Paid 30% less than men, glass ceiling, no women on top company boards, etc; etc.)
5. Legislate so that 50% of MPs are female (There are more women than men on earth and in some parts of Britain, more women are working than men. It would actually be fair to do this.)

In that way, many of the abortions which occur because mothers

Recommend (19)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip | [Link](#)

cannot afford to have another child, or because their careers will be irrevocably blighted would cease to occur. There will always be abortions which happen because of contraception accidents and youthful naivety about sex, but good education would help to prevent these unwanted pregnancies.

But if you really wanted to avoid "economic" abortions, you could do all these things. Strange that we never see the anti-abortionists lobbying for free nursery care or better family allowances, isn't it?

Comments on this page are now closed.

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.