

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES IN REPORTED CASES OF ABORTIONS FROM A TEACHING HOSPITAL

by

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"I believe the basic obligation we have to a new human being is that it be wanted. We will never all be created equal but we will be able to come close to that ideal when we are all born wanted. It is therefore logical that I accept abortion. The ethical and moral position I can take is to allow any woman who does not want to be pregnant to be aborted—to be aborted with dignity by a physician of her choice and at a price compatible with other medical services".

Dr. Selig, Neu Bardt, from his book
"Concept of Contraception".

Introduction

Abortion as a method of limiting births has been practiced by human race since thousands of years. In medical terminology abortion is defined as "Removal of growing embryo or foetus from the wall of the womb to which it has become attached". In most of the countries abortion is prohibited, both by law and religion, the two major tools of socialisation. In spite of this, the number of abortions is on the increase all over the world. In India, it is estimated that 4 to 6 million abortions take place every year.

It is a well known fact to-day that abortions in trained hands are safe but

due to the legal and the religious laws, majority of the abortions to-day are performed by untrained persons using primitive, painful and dangerous methods, thus resulting in very large percentage fatality. Most of the abortion cases who report to the hospitals are usually cases which have already been tempered by the untrained persons and of mortality and associated complications could have been avoided if they had come directly to the hospital. The religious taboos attached to the performance of abortions had been discussed for ages. The present study based on analysis of the records of four years, aims at finding out the religious differences in abortion cases.

Material and Methods

Details of all cases of abortions reported in a teaching hospital (attached to the medical college in Goa) from April, 1967 to March, 1971 have been carefully col-

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lected and analysed. The two major religions in Goa are Hindus and Catholics with a small population comprising of Muslims as the third religion. Analysis of the abortion cases by religion is confined to these three religious groups of population.

1. Distribution of Abortion Cases

A total of 752 cases of abortion were recorded in a period of four years, of which 61.0% were in Hindus, 36.1% from among Catholics and 2.9% from among Muslims.

1.1 Distribution of Abortions by Religion and Age

77.7% of abortions in Hindus, 76.2% in Catholics and 72.7% in Muslims, occurred in the age group 20-34 years—the peak period of fertility. The percentage of abortions in the age group 25-29 years is almost the same in the two major religions, Hindus and Catholics. In the age group 20-24 years, the percentage of abortion cases in Hindus was 31.5% as against 22% in Catholics. This percentage becomes reverse in the age group 30-34 years. The mean age of Hindu women at the time of abortion is 26.4 years, whereas for Catholics it is 28.0 years and for Muslims 27.0 years. The religious differences with respect to the mean age are significant ($F = 6.17$ $P .01$).

1.2 Distribution of Cases by Religion, Gravidity and Para

Analysis of abortions by gravidity in the different religions, show that more than two third (66.7%) of abortions among Muslims and more than half (54.6%) of abortions among Catholics take place after the 3rd gravidity, whereas among Hindus, only 43.6% of the abortion take place after 3rd gravidity. The religious differences in the mean gravi-

dity of Hindus (3.6), Catholics (4.2) and Muslims (3.9) are significant ($P < .05$). Similar significant religious differences have been observed with respect to parity among the three religions. After the 3rd parity, the percentage of abortions is much higher amongst Muslims (61.9%) and Catholics (49.6%) than among Hindus (37.3%).

1.3 Distribution of Abortion Cases by Religion and Pregnancy Wastage

Considering the present wastage for which the cases reported to the hospital, there is not much of a difference in the three religions but previous wastage is a little more (26.3) in Catholics than in Hindus (22.5). This difference is particularly marked in second wastage in Catholics and five plus wastage in Hindus. Taking the average wastage in all the three religions, the difference is not significant.

1.4 Distribution of Abortion Cases by Religion and Period of Gestation

The average period of gestation at the time of abortion in Hindus is 12.6 weeks, in Catholics 11.9 weeks and in Muslims is 14.6 weeks. 57.9% of abortions in Hindus, 61.7% in Catholics and 47.4% in Muslims reported to the hospital earlier than 12 weeks, but when the period of gestation is increased up to 16 weeks this percentage covers more than 3/4th of the total abortions reported.

1.5 Distribution of Abortion Cases by Religion and Time Since Onset of Symptoms

The mean time for the reporting of abortion cases in this hospital by Hindus (6.5 days) Catholics (7.5 days) and Muslims (8.4 days) show that Hindus report a day earlier than Catholics and Catho-

lics report a day earlier than Muslims, though the differences are not significant.

Discussion

Hospital studies usually have limitations to draw specific conclusions but since the territory of Goa has only one Medical College and the hospital under study is the major teaching hospital attached to the college and as abortions cases usually need hospitalisation, one can safely say that the distribution of abortions from this hospital can be considered a representative sample for this territory.

The analysis of the present study show that the percentage break up of abortions into the religious groups of Hindus, Catholics and Muslims is almost the same as is the distribution of the population of Goa by these three religions. In Goa, the Hindu population is 61.3%, the Catholics 36.2% and the Muslims 2.5%. This distribution strengthens the assumption that the present hospital data is not only representative of Goa population but also that in this territory there are no religious differences as far as total number of abortions are concerned.

Age distribution of mothers undergoing abortions in the peak reproductive age group of 20-34 years indicate the possibility of abortions being used as a method of limiting children by all the religions. Further, the percentage of abortions in the age group 25-29 years being almost the same in the two major religions of Hindus and Catholics, the difference by religion is present in the

age group 20-24 and 30-34 years. This difference in the two major religions in the age group 20-24 and 30-34 years imply that the age of reporting for abortions by Hindus is earlier than Catholics. This difference is much wider when Hindus are compared with Muslims. Same is the observation when gravidity and parity are compared. These observations hypothesise the possibility of abortions being used as a method of birth control at an earlier age and at an earlier gravidity and parity by Hindus as compared to the other two religions.

Conclusion

There are no religious differences in the percentage of abortions in the three religions. The indication of abortions being used as a method of child limitation as shown by the distribution by age, gravidity and parity is used at a younger age by Hindus as compared to the other two religions. This hypothesis needs to be studied further.

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