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MENTAL AND PHYSICAL RISKS AND EFFECTS OF INDUCED ABORTION ON WOMEN

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Statement of the Problem: Despite a declining trend, globally some 35 per 1,000 women aged 15-44 years undergo an induced abortion each year. Existing research on the mental and physical risks and effects of induced abortion often encounters methodological difficulties, such as the lack of a proper controlling of confounding factors or the lack of a sufficient time span in the study design.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: a literature study of empirical research published between 1985 and 2015 has been conducted. Results are analysed from an epidemiological and bio-ethical perspective.

Findings: In 2008, a review of the American Psychological Association did not find evidence that a single abortion would harm a woman's mental health. However, since then several studies reported Post Traumatic Stress or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among women after induced abortion. As regards physical risks and effects of induced abortion, a possible link between abortion and breast cancer is still in debate. In recent years a number of Asian studies have reported a significant relative risk for women with a history of induced abortion to develop breast cancer. On the other hand, several Western studies did not find an independent link between abortion and breast cancer. This difference might be explained by the stronger role of confounding factors, such as delayed child birth, nulliparity and the use of oral contraceptives among Western women. Finally, various international studies point to the risk of preterm births in pregnancies following a surgical abortion without pre-treatment. Preterm births are associated with a higher prevalence of major birth defects.

Conclusion & Significance: Women with unintended pregnancies considering an abortion should be informed of mental and physical risks and effects. For future research, cohort studies with a sufficient time span and diversified research strategies are required.

Biography

Ward Biemans SJ is the author of 'The Heart and the Abyss. Preventing Abortion' (Ballarat, 2016). In this book, insights from the fields of medicine, psychology, law, politics, economics, theology and ethics are drawn together. It provides an overview of empirical research on the mental and physical risks and effects of induced abortion. Besides that, it presents two case studies on the abortion legislation and practice in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, with practical recommendations on how to improve the care to women with unintended pregnancies. As an environmental scientist, he has been engaged in social-scientific and interdisciplinary research and in the implementation of regional governmental policy in the Netherlands. As a Jesuit priest, he is both experienced in bio-ethical research as well as in pastoral care.

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