



EUTYCHUS

Abortion debate extends to the pill

A growing number of doctors and pharmacists in the US are refusing to dispense the oral contraceptive pill on the grounds that it sometimes allows fertilisation but not implantation, and is thereby potentially abortifacient. The state of Wisconsin passed a bill to allow pharmacists to refuse to dispense drugs on moral grounds, but the governor vetoed the bill. One pharmacist has already lost his job after refusing to dispense an oral contraceptive. (*BBC News Website* 2003; 13 September)

Dutch paediatricians and euthanasia

The Dutch Paediatric Society is urging that decisions to hasten the death of babies with severe multiple handicaps should not be reported directly to the coroner's office, as currently required under Dutch law. Rather they suggest committees of doctors and lawyers should receive the reports, as this approach would be less threatening and would encourage more frequent reporting of cases, achieving greater transparency of what is a largely secretive practice. The Dutch law permitting 'voluntary' euthanasia does not cover mercy killing of any patient unable to express their wishes and yet research indicates that in about 100 cases each year paediatricians make decisions that result in the death of severely disabled babies. (*British Medical Journal* 2004; 329:591)

Abu-Ghraib inmates tortured by doctors

A damning report in the *Lancet* has added fuel to the scandal about Abu-Ghraib prison in Iraq, uncovering evidence that US medical personnel complied with demands for prisoners to be tortured. Professor Steven Miles of the University of Minnesota cites reports about inmates being subject to burns, shocks, asphyxiation and other physical methods of interrogation. Medical care of detainees was insufficient in many cases and failure to report injuries or deaths properly or abetting abusive guards by doctors also occurred. The Bush administration maintains that its armed forces will uphold the principles of the Geneva Convention wherever possible. In a separate editorial in the same issue of the *Lancet*, the journal urges any doctors who have been involved in such incidents to come clean, and to give a complete account of events at military compounds where terrorist prisoners are being held. (*Lancet* 2004; 364:9435, *BBC News Website* 2004; 20 August)

Prevention is better than cure

The proportion of babies born with neural tube anomalies in Newfoundland dropped by 78% after the Canadian government introduced a policy of having folic acid added to flour, cornmeal and pasta (*BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*; 2004, 4:20) The UK is yet to implement a policy to reduce the incidence of spina bifida by fortifying foodstuffs: instead the majority of babies with spina bifida are aborted.

Abstinence pledges work

A study released by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the US claims that teenagers who make abstinence pledges are less likely to be sexually active whilst at school or to engage in risky sexual activity. They are also less than half as likely to experience pregnancy as those who do not make a pledge and have half the number of sexual partners on average. Differences in behaviour were found to be similar even when race, socio-economic background and religion were factored in. (*The Heritage Foundation*, 21 September quoted in *SPUC Digest*)

IPPF and UNFPA push for more abortion

International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) has released a 10-year plan to establish a worldwide right to abortion on demand. IPPF's Strategic Framework 2005-2015 lists a number of strategies to achieve its goal of 'a universal recognition of a woman's right to choose and have access to safe abortion'. It also aims to 'analyse opposition messages and tactics and formulate messages and strategies that anticipate, respond and counteract them'. In a similar vein, the UN Population Fund has released its annual State of the World Population report which claims that access to abortion and contraception is 'an essential condition for meeting the UN's Millennium Development Goals to reduce global poverty by 2015'. (*www.unfpa.org* 2004; 15 September, *www.ippf.org* 2004; 10 September)

Most Britons would help others die

A poll conducted by NOP World on behalf of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society (VES) indicates that 47% of Britons would help a loved one die if they were suffering unbearably. Of the 790 adults asked 82% supported a change in the law, and 51% would want 'help to die' if they were terminally ill and suffering unbearably. Deborah Annetts, chief executive of the VES said, 'By saying they would be prepared to break the law if a terminally ill loved one asked them to, the public are sending a clear message to our lawmakers that the law needs reform'. (*The Guardian* 2004; 9 September)

Communion conundrums for US Catholics

US presidential candidate John Kerry has been outspoken about his pro-choice position, which stands in stark contrast to that of George W Bush. Many US Catholics argue that a 'true' Catholic cannot vote pro-abortion, whilst others believe their voting decision can rest upon more than just pro-life issues. A private memo by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger is causing some confusion. He has concluded that a politician must be denied communion if, after consistent teaching by the bishop, he persists in supporting abortion. However, he also stated that although any vote for a pro-abortion politician is cooperation in 'evil', such voters may still receive communion if there are 'proportionate' reasons for their votes. The debate about what such 'proportionate' reasons may be continues. (*C-FAM bulletins* 2004)

Furore over Italian fertility laws

Italy's *Medically Assisted Reproduction Law*, which came into effect in March, may prove unworkable. The new law aims to give the embryo and the mother equal rights. Only stable, heterosexual couples of childbearing age can seek infertility treatment and can create only three embryos in one cycle of treatment, none of which can be genetically tested, and all of which must be implanted at once. Under the law one woman had to have three IVF embryos transferred to her womb at once, and later undergo selective termination because her life was at risk. Italians are travelling to neighbouring countries for infertility treatment and the tiny republic of San Marino is opening a private clinic just across the border in order to cash in on this development. Reproductive medicine specialists and women's rights groups in Europe have criticised the legislation, which is supported by the Catholic Church. A parliamentary committee is currently reviewing the law. By contrast, the HFEA's UK guidelines stipulate that only two embryos should be placed in the womb at any one time because of the risk of multiple pregnancy (*British Medical Journal* 2004; 329:71, *Independent* 2004; 15 September)