

Philippa Taylor outlines some key areas for the coming year

BEGINNING OF LIFE ISSUES IN 2017



key points

- The 50th anniversary of the Abortion Act is likely to spark debate from both sides, particularly in Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man.
- Conscientious objection will be a big issue in 2017 as the General Pharmaceutical Council proposes to restrict significantly – possibly remove altogether – the right for pharmacists to object conscientiously to dispensing emergency contraceptives.
- The question of allowing abortion on the grounds of disability will continue with Lord Shinkwin's Abortion (Disability Equality) Bill, the 'We're All Equal' campaign and concerns that NIPT will have a negative impact on people with Down's Syndrome.

This year will be another busy and challenging year on beginning of life issues.

Abortion

October 2017 marks the 50th Anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act. Throughout the year this significant anniversary will generate media publicity, events, stories from women and will fire up campaigns by those who want to see the laws tightened up (or at least adhered to) as well as those who want to relax the law on abortion even more. Already a Ten Minute Rule Bill has been debated in Parliament, seeking to decriminalise abortion and effectively legalise it, on demand, up to birth.¹

We expect to see more focus this year on the operation of abortion clinics in the UK and Africa,² and new research on the link between abortion and preterm births. There will be ongoing debate on the discriminatory provision in the Act that permits abortion to term for disability, as a result of Lord Shinkwin's Abortion (Disability Equality) Bill and the 'We're All Equal' campaign that supports the Bill.

It will be fascinating to see what happens in the United States under the more overtly pro-life administration of Donald Trump. Already there has been media heat generated over the defunding of Planned Parenthood, the biggest abortion provider in the US, and over the President's nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court. Gorsuch has a strong record of protecting life and religious liberty.

Artificial gametes

Scientists have now created artificial mouse eggs,³ using just a bit of mouse skin, and used these eggs to produce fertile pups. While it is unlikely that

humans will be born via artificial eggs anytime soon, it is likely that we will see more teams developing artificial human gametes for research purposes. (In 2015 scientists from the UK and Israel created precursors to gametes from embryonic stem cells.)

Chimeras

Scientists are already creating human-animal chimeras in the United States and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) proposes to fund more experiments. Some research with chimeras is ethical; however newer forms of stem-cell-based chimera research involving the use of embryos means the human cells could become anything, including human eggs or sperm, and would increase human/non-human mixing.

Conscientious objection

2017 is a crucial year in the fight for freedom of conscience for Christians. The General Pharmaceutical Council is proposing significantly to change the conscience protection currently provided for pharmacists by removing any reference to referral and instead requiring pharmacists to participate directly in activities that they believe are morally wrong. If implemented, this would establish a precedent for overriding the consciences of doctors, nurses, other health professionals and more generally in society.⁴

Contraception

As noted above, there is pressure to significantly restrict – possibly remove altogether – the right for pharmacists to object conscientiously to dispensing emergency contraceptives.⁵ CMF will publish a new booklet *Contraception: a guide to ethical use* – written specifically for Christians – so expect to see the publicity later this year.

Embryo research

Scientists in the UK have succeeded in growing human embryos in the laboratory for longer than ever achieved before, and are now pressing to go further, beyond the current legal limit of 14 days. Expect more publicity and vocal calls by scientists for extension to the legal research limit, but no actual legal change – yet. The race is also on to make artificial embryos in the lab, with announcements of some success in this by a British team in March this year.⁶

Gene editing

There have been tremendous advances in gene editing in the last two years, which will continue, primarily through the use of CRISPR-Cas9 and other similar techniques. They currently appear to offer novel and powerful approaches to modify genomic sequences and treat many human diseases, including HIV/AIDS, haemophilia, sickle cell anaemia and several forms of cancer. Expect further progress with therapies.

Gene editing of embryos

Gene editing of embryos is also proposed by UK scientists as a way to rid the human race of certain genetic conditions. Specific enzymes are added to the early embryo, to cut and replace particular DNA regions, creating changes that will pass down generations. New, more accurate enzymes have brought human gene editing closer to reality. Expect to see more advances in research on embryos, but not therapies yet.

Isle of Man

The present conservative Manx abortion law is likely to come under threat this year. HEAR (Humanity and Abortion Reform), a pro-life campaign group and CALM (Campaign for Abortion Law Modernisation) are two new groups that will be at the heart of public debates on abortion law reform in 2017.

Mitochondrial replacement research

The Human Fertilisation and Embryo Authority has recently permitted the creation of three-parent babies in the UK, so this will progress in 2017. The world's first 'three-parent baby' was born in Mexico in April 2016 using genetic material from two mothers and one father, a second one was born in the Ukraine this year,⁷ and no doubt we will hear of others in 2017 in other unregulated environments. We may not hear so much about the failed attempts.

Non invasive prenatal testing

The Government is intending to implement cell-free DNA (cfDNA) screening, a technique that is able to detect disability more accurately in unborn children, into the NHS Fetal Anomaly Screening Programme in the next three years. This will likely be rolled out from 2018, but expect to see more publicity about the discriminatory effect of these tests, and their negative impact on people with Down's Syndrome,

driven by the 'Don't Screen us Out' campaign.

There are new tests in the pipeline, with improved accuracy, speed and ease of use, that will be able to screen babies in utero for single-gene disorders like muscular dystrophy or Huntington's disease.⁸

Northern Ireland

Despite the political uncertainty in Northern Ireland, it is still probable that there will be debates in the Assembly, in the media and public campaigns to change the law to allow for abortion for diagnoses of fatal fetal abnormality. If so, also expect Assembly debates on legislation to increase support for pregnant women receiving such a diagnosis. A new campaign, 'Both Lives Matter', has been launched to defend current laws on abortion and to support women with an unplanned pregnancy better.

Robotics

Alongside a significant rise in the use of robotics and nanotechnologies in medicine in the immediate future, robotics is already being utilised to improve the accuracy of 18–20 week ultrasound imaging and screening in pregnancy, searching for fetal anomalies.

Scotland

The devolution of abortion law as part of the Scotland Act 2016 will generate a campaign to remove some of the legal restrictions on abortion access and develop a Scottish approach to provision of abortion, which will be vigorously opposed by pro-life groups.

Surrogacy

There will be more concerted efforts to remove some of the legal restrictions in the UK on surrogacy to make surrogacy easier for any commissioning parent(s) and to remove some of the parental rights of surrogates, as well as making surrogacy contracts enforceable. The complexity of modern parental arrangements, driven by gamete donation, surrogacy and demand from infertile and same sex couples for children will generate more court cases to determine who is a 'parent'. In contrast, in Europe two developments this year have restricted surrogacy arrangements and strengthened the protection of children born to surrogates.⁹ Perhaps one outcome of 'Brexit' is that Europe may be spared some of the pernicious influence of the UK's attitude to surrogacy – and perhaps also in some of the other areas where the UK leads the way in unethical research.

*Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are his. And he changes the times and the seasons; he removes kings and raises up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.*¹⁰

Please pray for wisdom, knowledge and grace for the CMF Public Policy team in 2017!

Philippa Taylor is CMF Head of Public Policy.



references

- Ryan AB. Abortion Decriminalisation: Ten Minute Rule Bill tabled. *Abortion Rights Blog* 1 March 2017 bit.ly/2mslJDS
- Fouch S. Activists' attempt to legalise abortion on demand up until birth is both unnecessary and unwanted. *CMF Blogs* 3 March 2017 cmf.li/2INEddW
- Ekeocha O. Killing Africa: Exposing the MSI Mission in Africa. *Culture of Life Africa* 7 January 2017 bit.ly/2n5po7C
- Hikabe O, Hamazaki N et al. Reconstitution in vitro of the entire cycle of the mouse female germ line. *Nature* ;538:299-303 go.nature.com/2ID6Ryh
- Saunders P. Regulator's proposal to remove pharmacists' conscience rights is unethical, unnecessary and quite possibly illegal. *CMF Blogs* 21 February 2017 cmf.li/2IS56y9
- Response of the Christian Medical Fellowship to the General Pharmaceutical Council consultation on 'Religion, Personal Values and Beliefs'. *CMF* 9 March 2017 bit.ly/2mpqItU
- Harrison SE, Sozen B et al. Assembly of embryonic and extra-embryonic stem cells to mimic embryogenesis in vitro. *Science* 2 March 2017 bit.ly/2lvFOok
- Coghlan A. First baby born using 3-parent technique to treat infertility. *New Scientist* 18 January 2017 bit.ly/2mLvbD9
- Klein A. Simple blood test can detect genetic diseases early in pregnancy. *New Scientist* 4 January 2017 bit.ly/2n5ucJW
- Taylor P. Surrogacy - good rulings from Europe put the UK out on a limb. *CMF Blogs* 14 February 2017 cmf.li/2n5pwnn
- Daniel 2:20-21