

Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, INC.

PUBLICATIONS OFFICE

104 East 25th Street, New York, N.Y. 10010

New address: 419 Park Avenue South
New York, N. Y. 10016

Phone: Alex Sareyan
212/889-5760

FOR RELEASE: SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1969

New York -- "Abortion when performed by a licensed physician should be entirely removed from the domain of criminal law."

This is one of the conclusions presented by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, an organization consisting of nearly 300 distinguished psychiatrists, in a report it has just released entitled THE RIGHT TO ABORTION: A PSYCHIATRIC VIEW.

In this document, formulated by the organization's Committee on Psychiatry and Law, the authors have analyzed the question of legalized abortion from social, ethical, and legal viewpoints and have also concluded "... that a woman should have the right to abort or not, just as she has a right to marry or not." Anything short of this "... stand(s) foursquare against the right of the woman to control her own reproductive life."

The authors feel that the moral questions of "when life begins" and "what constitutes the taking of a life" in this particular situation are answerable only through personal religious beliefs and should not, therefore, be directed by the state. "There can be no doubt," they assert, "that strong religious ideals contribute to sustaining the system of legal

(more)

sanctions that makes abortion a source of guilt and labels it a crime."

The report points out that opinions of both the Roman Catholic Church and English law on this subject have altered down through history. And today's society is still uncertain. "Were our society convinced that abortion is murder," the authors say, "it would exact the same penalty against abortionists as is levied against other parties to premeditated murder - life imprisonment or even capital punishment. Of course our society does no such thing."

This same uncertainty is reinforced by the use of several present-day methods of birth control, according to the authors. The function of some of "... the chemical and mechanical means of birth control is probably to interrupt the pregnancy after conception has taken place. In so doing, these contraceptives have made it all the more difficult to delineate contraception from abortion."

The authors emphasize that present laws do not eliminate illegal abortion, citing studies suggesting that most abortions in the U. S. are illegal. The affluent do not find it difficult to obtain a "therapeutic" abortion, while others, the report says, "... are driven by their needs into the hands of practitioners and charlatans who may employ dangerous techniques... Thus decisions are made individually and personally, responsive to social, economic, moral, religious, and psychological factors, regardless of the status of the law."

Seeing the moral issue of abortion as a "seemingly insoluble" legislative problem, the authors turn to other considerations. They express repeated concern for the mental health of both the mother and the unwanted child. "There can be nothing more destructive to a child's spirit than being unwanted," the authors maintain, "and there are few things more disruptive to a woman's spirit than being forced without love or need into motherhood."

In other arguments, they criticize the American Law Institute's "liberalized" abortion law. This law provides for a legal abortion when great risk to the mother's physical or mental health is apparent, or when conditions indicate that the child would be born with grave physical or mental handicap. Such beliefs must be certified by two physicians in writing.

The authors argue that this law, in effect in some states now, does not provide any answer to the moral question. Neither does it provide specific "psychiatric criteria" for standardizing interpretation of the law in all states. Thus, decisions fall upon the psychiatrists instead of upon the individual or upon society. The authors support the statement, "If society wants abortion to be easier, it should have the courage to campaign for it honestly and not exploit the psychiatrist..." The law, according to the report, also calls for what may be "in the pregnant woman's eyes" a public confession, eliminating the "confidential nature of the doctor-patient relationship."

In their conclusion, the authors suggest "... that many of the social, sexual, and pragmatic goals served by legal sanction against abortion have diminished in the past decades ...

(more)

(and) their continued application no longer can be sustained by a justifiable state interest." They recommend further study leading to future policy changes.

The GAP Committee on Psychiatry and Law that formulated the report on THE RIGHT TO ABORTION: A PSYCHIATRIC VIEW consisted of Dr. Zigmond M. Lebensohn, Washington, D. C., chairman, and Drs. Edward T. Auer, St. Louis; John Donnelly, Hartford; Jay Katz, New Haven; Carl P. Malmquist, Minneapolis; Seymour Pollack, Los Angeles; Alan A. Stone, Cambridge; Gene L. Usdin, New Orleans; and Andrew S. Watson, Ann Arbor. Consultants to the committee were Alice S. Rossi, Ph. D., Department of Social Relations, The John Hopkins University; and Ralph Slovenko, LL.B., Wayne State University Law School.

Although formulated by the Committee on Psychiatry and Law, the report reflects the judgment of all members of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry. Established in 1946, GAP now consists of 280 psychiatrists who have achieved distinction in their chosen fields. With the collaborative aid of consultants from other disciplines, GAP's 21 working committees are constantly engaged in the study and application of psychiatric insights to mental health and human relations.

Copies of THE RIGHT TO ABORTION: A PSYCHIATRIC VIEW, GAP Publication No. 75, may be obtained at \$1.00 each from the Publications Office, Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 419 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Quantity prices are available upon request.