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Abortion Women Leading Lives of Mental Turmoil

By Tom O'Gorman

It's not often that a self-confessed "rational, pro-choice, atheist" warns of the dangers posed by abortion. But that's exactly what Dr David Ferguson has just done. Dr Ferguson, a leading medical academic has co-authored a report for the Christchurch Health and Development Study, showing that abortion significantly increases the risks of mental health problems for women. The news has sent shockwaves through the medical community, and could lead to a serious rethink on this emotive issue.

The study, published in the Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology and involved 500 women over a 25 year period, showed that women who had abortions were twice as likely to experience drink problems, and three times more likely to use illicit drugs. They were also 46 per cent more likely to experience major depression, and anxiety than women who did not have abortions.

Ireland's leading advocate of abortion services, the Irish Family Planning Association, was contacted repeatedly by The Voice for a response to this study, but declined to comment

The research, however, looks set to reignite the debate. Pro-life advocates had claimed that abortion hurt women. Groups like Women Hurt by Abortion here in the 80s and Silent No More and Feminists for Life in the US said that the trauma caused by abortion made a mockery of the slogan "A woman's right to choose". Pro-choice activists responded that such claims were not supported by sufficient research.

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But recently more credible research has emerged to give weight to pro-life claims. Late last year, a Norwegian study showed that women who had abortions

were more likely to suffer long-term mental health problems than women who lost children through miscarriages. In 2000, Finnish research showed that women who had abortions were at greater risk of suicide than women who continued their pregnancies or of women who did not become pregnant.

But according to Dr Patricia Casey, Professor of Psychiatry in UCD, the importance of this study is its size. "It's one of the largest studies done on the area and it's one of the best designed, which means that the results are more credible," says Professor Casey. The research, she says, has taken other risk factors for mental health into account, so that the impact of abortion can be assessed on its own. "This is a very robust study published in a very well regarded journal," she adds.

But many who counsel women who have experienced abortion say that the study only confirms for them what they already knew about the hurt caused by abortion. Dr Theresa Burke of Rachel's Vineyard, a US counseling agency, says that abortion often leads to feelings of grief, but women don't feel free to deal with those emotions openly. 'Most women in this situation try to bury their feelings. Often, their abortion is a complete secret and they have no support," Dr Burke says.

The abortion itself, she says, is often experienced as a profound separation, leading to feelings of deep loneliness. This loneliness is only made worse by the lack of support from those around her. "The woman is alone in her grief," according to Dr Burke.

In order to deal with this, many turn to drink, drugs and sexual promiscuity in order to numb the pain. Some even deal in drugs. "The woman often feels as though she has crossed a moral threshold, so that activities she would have never engaged in become more permissible," Dr Burke says. Often, a desire to postpone sleep for as long as possible is a factor in this lifestyle. "Some of the symptoms of this grieving are nightmares and flashbacks, so some women want to avoid sleep," she says.

Others become workaholics, trying to blot out their feelings by focusing on their career. Others develop eating disorders, such as bulimia, which act as a kind of replacement secret, enabling them to blame their trauma on something else. Such behavior is known as traumatic reenactment. Through such strategies, Dr Burke says, many women are able to avoid confronting their feelings of loss for many years. "Some women can cope with the pent up emotions for 10 to 15 years," she says.

Bernadette Goulding validates these claims. At 19, she underwent an abortion, an experience she describes as being "forever etched in my memory". "I was

frightened and alone," Goulding says, adding that she had nightmares every night after the procedure. "I had one recurring one in which I was trying to catch a baby who was always just out of my reach," she says. Her feelings of guilt were severe and she suffered from acute depression. "Part of me died with my baby in that hospital"

Even after she married and had children, these feelings were intense. Despite the fact that her husband urged her to leave it behind, the abortion continued to haunt her. "I was so afraid that something bad would happen to them because of what I had done. I felt that I didn't deserve to have them. I thought that God would punish me by harming my children."

Nobody told Bernadette that there was any risk of emotional harm. "The doctor assured me that I could have a simple medical procedure to remove some cells and tissue in my womb. The word baby was never mentioned," Colliding says now. It was only after she shared her secret with a close friend that she began to make the journey towards healing her pain.

Hearing about a US group called Rachel's Vineyard, which offers spiritual healing to women hurt by abortion; Bernadette visited one of their retreats. It was a revelation to her. "They understood the pain and the shame that accompanies post-abortive women," she says. She now helps co-ordinate retreats for women who have been through the same pain in Ireland.

One of the things which she discovered when she traveled to the US to find out more about Rachel's Vineyard was that her feelings of guilt were not simply due to her religious upbringing. "I had thought that I had reacted like this because I was a Catholic, but I met plenty of people who had the same experience, of all faiths and none," she recalls. "Abortion is no respecter of religion or tradition. It's a human reaction."

Professor Patricia Casey echoes this view. "One of the most significant things about this New Zealand study is that it was conducted in a predominantly secular country, rather than a Catholic country," she points out "That shows that the emotional trauma caused by abortion is not due to social stigma" Other studies, from countries such as Norway and Finland noted for their strongly secular cultures, show similar findings.

Professor Casey does not believe that the study will cause everybody to re-think their attitude to abortion. "It will confirm those who are already pro-life," she says, adding that abortion is "primarily an ethical question". "The key issue in abortion isn't the suffering that it causes women, it's the fact that abortion is the taking of innocent human life," she insists.

She does believe however, that, at a minimum, agencies here, such as Marie Slopes and the Irish Family Planning Association, who refer women to abortion clinics in the UK, ought to advise women of the potential risks related to abortion. "Otherwise they could be open to legal action in the future."



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