

# Study Shows Years of Pain After Abortion

by Steve Weatherbe

OSLO, Norway — Women who have had abortions suffer from it for years in a way women who have had miscarriages never do, says a major new study. A five-year study comparing Norwegian women who suffered miscarriages with those who had abortions found that, at the end of the study period, the latter group suffered significantly greater distress, including anxiety, guilt and shame at the end of the study period. The Norwegian study, published Dec.12 in the journal BMC Medicine, showed throughout the five-year period that women who had abortions had significantly more anxiety and depression than the average adult Norwegian female, whereas miscarrying women scored higher only at the outset.

The report says that women report only one positive feeling about their abortions: They are relieved at not having the burdens associated with childcare. But they report many negatives: women who experienced induced abortion had significantly greater IES (Impact of Event Scale) scores for avoidance and or feelings of guilt [and] shame ... than the miscarriage group at two and five years after" the unborn child's death. Avoidance refers to conscious attempts to suppress the memory of an event. The report hedges its findings, suggesting the higher anxiety and depression levels may have preceded the abortions. However, Broen said, "We cannot exclude the induced abortion as a risk factor of anxiety later on. The induced abortion may represent a mental and moral conflict to some of the women with induced abortion."

NARAL Pro-Choice America Foundation declined to comment on the study. Its website lists many studies apparently contradicting the Norwegian results, such as an American Psychological Association review that "found that severe negative reactions to abortions are rare. The review concluded that the vast majority of women experience a mixture of emotions after an abortion, with positive feelings predominating." The study team leader, Dr. Anne Nordal Broen of the University of Oslo, told the Register by e-mail that she was "surprised about the rather high scores on the avoidance part of the trauma test, ... I also was somewhat surprised that the women with abortion had statistically significantly higher anxiety scores than the general population during all the five years after the event."

## Informing Women

Broen also expressed surprise that her study had been reported by national media in Britain (the BBC) and the United States (the *Washington Times* and Fox Television). However, she noted that the study was unique in two ways; "The follow-up time is as long as five years, with four interview time points, and ... the women filled in psychological tests that are internationally recognized and much used." The study found that 30% of the women who had abortions felt mental distress 10 days afterwards and that 20% were still distressed five years later. As well, seven out of the 87 women who had had abortions dropped out of the study before it was complete "because it was too difficult for them to answer questions about the pregnancy termination." Broen's group recommended all women seeking abortion be warned of the risk of long-term mental distress.

The BBC quoted an unnamed spokesman for the Family Planning Association in Great Britain reacting to the study. "There is no evidence to suggest that abortion directly causes psychological trauma," he said. "Women can experience mixed feelings after an abortion, such as relief or sadness. These are natural reactions and few women experience long-term problems." The BBC also cited a spokesman for British Pregnancy Advisory Service billed by the BBC as "the UK's leading provider of abortion services" as claiming that women "rarely" come back for post-abortion counseling "because they are able to cope with it by themselves."

Dr. Philip Ney, a Victoria, British Columbia, psychiatrist who has extensively studied the psychological impact of abortion on the women, involved as well as their other children, told the Register that though the Norwegian study considered too few women to be considered an accurate picture, it supports what larger studies have shown. "It's probably right," he said. "But it is hard to obtain research funding for any study on abortion." Ney supported the Norwegian study's recommendation that women be informed of the likelihood of anxiety, shame and guilt feelings. "All patients must be able to give informed consent, which means they must be well informed of all possible adverse consequences."

## Human Attaching

Ney participated with three U.S. researchers in a study of 138,666 California women who had their abortions or childbirth funded by Medicaid in 1989 showing significantly higher psychiatric admissions for those having abortions over the next six years. The report, "*Psychiatric Admissions of Low-Income Women Following Abortion and Childbirth*", was published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal in May 2003. The sharpest difference came in the first 90 days, when women who had an abortion were 2.6 times more likely than those giving birth to receive psychiatric care. Over the next four years, among the most frequent presenting conditions were single episodes of depressive psychosis and bipolar disorder. Overall, psychiatric admissions for those who had received abortions occurred 1.7 times as often as for those delivering their children.

"Human attaching is generally an agreeable experience, and it occurs with every baby whether he/she is wanted or not," explained Ney. "Every human detachment is painful," he said. "With abortion, guilt complicates the grief, and results in pathological grief which often leads to depression. Too often, women are prescribed antidepressant medication for symptoms of grief which are mistaken for depression, and that further prolongs the grieving. But in order to be processed, grief must be felt." Ney has found through his studies and clinical practice that not only do women who have abortions suffer lasting negative psychological and spiritual impact, but their other children are affected as well. "Abortion survivors understand that they are alive only because they are 'wanted' while their aborted sibling was not wanted." He said they further feel they have no intrinsic value, and are more likely than other children to have abortions themselves.

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Steve Weatherbe is based in Victoria, British Columbia

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