I am a retired Consultant Physician and have been chair of the Northern Ireland committee of the Christian Medical Fellowship which is part of the UK fellowship. I write as this issue particularly affects us in Northern Ireland as citizens and as health care professionals who have a duty of care to women and the unborn children in Northern Ireland.

Summary

1 Comment on the status of the human embryo and foetus in the womb: human life begins at conception

2 Comment on what is best for the mother: both the mental and physical health of the woman are more at risk from abortion than from continuing the pregnancy

3 Previous ruling concerning devolvement of government to NI: this included legislation on Abortion

Re: Abortion Law Northern Ireland

I wish to state our national committee’s opposition to the decriminalisation amendment of the abortion legislation currently in place in Northern Ireland presently being considered by the select committee.

1 There are 3 fundamental issues to be considered. The most important is, ‘When does a human being become just that – a human being?’ Some consider implantation in the womb (at 5 days) to be the important time, but in reality implantation is a process and not really a single event. The law considers 14 days to be important as medical experimentation on embryos is not allowed after that embryological date. If the being/embryo or baby was just a collection of cells, then why should experimentation not be allowed after that date? Abortion is not normally allowed after 24 weeks gestation under the modified Act. Why was this reduced from the original 28 weeks? This was due to medical progress so that after 24 weeks the foetus/baby is likely to survive with appropriate care. No-one suggests that a foetus/baby once born should be killed or left to die inevitably as that would be infanticide – though that has been practiced by other societies legally in the past. None of these possible dates has any particular medical justification outside the embryo or foetus or baby itself – we impose the date for practical reasons to make things “easier” for us. The only possible time which relies on the baby itself is at fertilisation, when a unique new DNA code comes into being. The gametes – ova or sperm - can have clearly no particular value themselves before this event. Even if we say we cannot know for sure – then if we are unsure we must surely decide in favour of the time of fertilisation as we could otherwise be ending the life of another human being.

2 The second consideration is ‘What is best for the mother?’ 98% of abortions in the UK are performed in order to safeguard the mental health of the women, according to the information on the certificates which are collected. What is the medical evidence that this is true? Actually, the best evidence, from a study carried out by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, is that, if we take prior mental disorder or illness into account and we run the study long enough, the mental health of the
woman who has decided to have an abortion is not improved compared with women who continue the pregnancy. In fact, it is slightly but significantly worsened. Women who have an abortion are more likely to have a premature delivery in any subsequent pregnancy and there are higher risks for future cardiovascular disease. So it comes down to social convenience and difficulty – weighed against the right to life of the embryo, foetus or baby. We might call it choice – but choices always need to be weighed where interests are in conflict. There is a small or very small increased medical risk of breast cancer in women who have had abortions compared with those who continue pregnancy. Cases where the life of the mother is at risk or there is a risk of substantial mental or physical damage occurring are thankfully few, and are best dealt with by the medical team looking after the women, taking all available relevant opinions into account including the level of risk the woman is willing to take, if she has the capacity to make this decision.

3 Finally I should remind you if I might, that this issue has been considered at Stormont and in order to reflect all communities here, which was required at Stormont, any change in the abortion law in Northern Ireland was rejected. The parliament has made a judgement and this should stand unless overturned by a future devolved Assembly.

December 2018