

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH/BOOK REVIEW

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Book Review

Abortion in the USA and the UK. Colin Francome. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2004. ISBN: 0 7546 3015 3. Pages: 154. Price: £35.00 (hardback)

Colin Francome has devoted much of his academic life to researching the abortion issue, and this book provides an insightful account of his findings. Comparing the USA and UK throughout, it begins in the present, outlining the realities of the provision of, and demand for, abortion. It moves back in time, summarising the processes through which abortion was legalised over three decades ago, and forward again with an account of the political debate to the present.

The overriding similarity between these two societies is evident in data presented about the demand for abortion. Some specifics are highlighted - for example, why the abortion rate is higher in the USA - but overall it is clear that for women in both societies abortion was, is, and will remain a fact of life. Attention is rightly drawn to differences, most clearly in the legal and political aspects. Women in the USA have legal

provision for 'the right to choose' which they lack in the UK (very obviously in Northern Ireland where the Abortion Act does not apply). But in the UK the political movement to oppose legal abortion is relatively weak, meaning contest over abortion is muted by comparison.

An unprecedented victory for the American anti-abortion movement discussed by Francome is the recent passing of a law by the US Congress which, for the first time in American history, bans a particular medical procedure, termed by its opponents 'partial birth abortion'. Other events under the Bush administration indicate similarly the extent to which abortion remains politicised by its opponents' activities.

But it would be wrong to imagine that opposition to abortion is not important in Britain. Recent events make it clear that despite the relative weakness of the religiously inspired campaign for the 'right to life of the unborn', abortion is contentious. Over the last year, high-profile public debate has crystallised around abortion for fetal abnormality, in particular cleft palate, and 'late' abortion, carried out for any reason. Francome includes statistics in his book that show that these abortions are statistically marginal, yet they have moved to the

centre of the British abortion controversy.

The dominance of argument hostile to provision of abortion in these cases is striking. What is also notable is that its proponents come in many forms. Feminists including Naomi Wolf and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown have voiced their 'disquiet' about abortion after 12 weeks, as have clinicians who work in obstetrics. Journalists fixated with both four-dimensional ultrasound images and with the very attractive current champion of the 'rights' of the abnormal fetus, the Reverend Joanna Jepson, have joined in. Some in the disability rights lobby play an important role in portraying abortion for abnormality as 'eugenic'. Politicians including David Steel are arguing for a reduced upper time limit.

Francome reminds us that the woman is, always, the person who should have the moral authority to decide whether to end a pregnancy. Those who agree with this standpoint need to be aware the abortion debate has moved on, and presents us with new challenges.

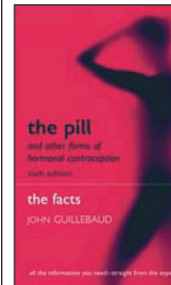
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The Pill and other forms of hormonal contraception: The Facts



John Guillebaud, Emeritus Professor of Family Planning and Reproductive Health, University College London; Honorary Consultant in Family Planning and Reproductive Health, Oxford Primary Care Trust; formerly Medical Director, the Margaret Pyke Centre, London, UK

During the 40 years since the Pill was first marketed, more money has been spent researching its safety than was spent on its development through the 1950s. Although it has repeatedly been established it as one of the least harmful medicines ever formulated, there are some risks, and a number of 'Pill scares' have been reported in the media. Following each of these many women give up the Pill, and do not always find a satisfactory alternative. Professor Guillebaud gives a balanced explanation of the risks, benefits and side-effects and his book is based on the latest and best research evidence.

The sixth edition of this popular handbook is still the only book to give comprehensive information - with no fudging on the unwanted side effects - about the Pill and related hormonal methods of contraception. The author, an experienced prescriber and trusted medical author, writes in a clear and accessible way. He believes strongly in women's autonomy: 'the user is always the chooser'.

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