

JULY 1986

Prince Edward Island Abolishes All Abortions

Anti-choice organizers have finally succeeded in abolishing the one remaining therapeutic abortion committee in Prince Edward Island, making P.E.I. the only province where abortions cannot legally be performed.

At the Prince County Hospital Annual Meeting on June 4th, the five-year battle by the anti-abortionists resulted in a vote of 978 to 396 to delete the therapeutic abortion committee from the hospital's bylaws (a move that required a two-thirds majority.)

This technical removal of the committee in fact does not change the situation for women in P.E.I. No abortion has been performed there since 1982, and because of the rigid criteria (the woman's life had to be endangered by the pregnancy), the women and medical community there knew there was little point in applying.

The total lack of access there has not meant that women of P.E.I. do not have abortions - it does mean that at great expense they must travel to the U.S. or to Quebec. The closest U.S. access is in Maine and the latest STATSCAN report states that a minimum of 408 women travelled there in 1984 (latest figures available) and it is estimated that at least 250 women travelled to clinics in Quebec. Nova Scotia would be a closer destination but residency requirements preclude having abortions there. There are no statistics available on the number of women who resort to self-induced or illegal abortions or are forced to carry through with an unwanted pregnancy because of this tragic situation.

The P.E.I. chapter of CARAL, under the leadership of Dr. Alice Crook, has been carrying on an active educational campaign on the issue of choice for a long time. Crook says the shock of the complete cutting off of abortion access may ignite the pro-choice population into action. She said "Some people feel now that the situation has become so dramatic in P.E.I. that it might force the government to look at the law."

The issue received wide coverage in the media across the country, in news stories that often related access problems in other areas to the situation in P.E.I., and in editorials that pointed out the inadequacies of the present law that allowed such control to be taken by an anti-choice minority. An editorial in the Ottawa Citizen of June 7, 1986:

"No Committee - no abortions. By that strategy, anti-abortion groups in many regions have effectively banned local abortions. They have either applied enough pressure on hospital boards, or become board members, to abolish the necessary committees. Of course, the strategy does not really eliminate abortions; it just sends them somewhere else. It mostly hurts the poor and frightened. Better-off women, and those determined enough, pay the costs of an abortion out of town, or even out of country. It imposes anxiety and hardship."

The best editorial that we have seen that draws the correct conclusions from the P.E.I. situation appeared in The Toronto Star on June 17, 1986, and we are reprinting it here:

Committee system victimizes women

Two recent events indicate that the system of therapeutic abortion committees set up under the Criminal Code has failed to provide equal access to women seeking abortion in various parts of the country.

This month, Prince Edward Island's only therapeutic abortion committee was disbanded by its directors. That makes P.E.I. the only province in which a woman cannot get a legal abortion.

And in Toronto recently, the way in which so many of the committees have become politicized was demonstrated in the unsuccessful attempt of a Pro-Life slate to gain more seats on the board of the Markham-Stouffville Hospital in a bid to influence the policies of that hospital's committee.

Couple these developments with the fact that the vast majority of Ontario's publicly funded hospitals do not perform abortions, and one is left with the inescapable conclusion that the make-up of committees, or absence of them, has denied women access to legal abortions.

The heart of the problem is that the committees have been free to assert their own prejudices, unhindered by any guidelines. This has permitted them to act as rubber stamps, sometimes straining the strict words of the law in order to permit abortions, or, conversely, to throw all kinds of barriers in the way, such as requiring a psychiatrist's report or insisting on the written consent of a spouse or a parent, even though this could cause delay, create risk and increase the psychological pressure on the applicant.

In spite of the P.E.I. situation, the federal government is playing politically safe and refusing to change the law, even though women in that province must go to Maine, Montreal — or resort to unsafe procedures — to have their abortions, if they can afford to do so.

And the provinces, other than Quebec, are also playing it safe by refusing to exercise the power they have to establish and regulate clinics so that women seeking to exercise their legal right to have an abortion have reasonable, available access to one, no matter where they may reside.

Lets face it head on: The therapeutic abortion committee process is a sham and a failure. It makes victims of women who seek legal abortions but are caught in the federal-provincial pass-the-buck routine.

Surely, when a law is being administered so unequally and unfairly, politicians must set aside political expediency.

The responsibility, therefore, falls on provincial governments to establish regulated private or government-run clinics providing access to legal abortions in locations where they are needed.

And the federal government should have the courage to dispense with the committee system entirely and limit the application of the criminal law to persons performing abortions outside of a licensed clinic.

Write to the New Minister of Justice

We have a new Minister of Justice in Ottawa, the Hon. Ray Hnatyshyn, and we feel it is very important that as many of our supporters as possible write to him to express concern about the present crisis in abortion access in Canada. We have included a sample letter and because politicians pay far more attention to personal rather than form letters, we ask you to re-write or re-type the sample letter, changing it as you wish to reflect your own personal style.

Failing that, please add a few personal comments to the sample letter or, if time prevents, just send the letter as it, making sure to add your own return address. But do send it. The politicians do count the letters they receive as a strong indicator of public opinion and we know there are busy anti-choice letter-writers.

We'd like you to copy the letter as well and have friends and relatives get in their views as well. Imagine the impact if every CARAL member wrote a letter - and there are now over 14,000 of you! Remember that NO STAMP IS NEEDED, but you must put M.P. after Mr. Hnatyshyn's name on the envelope.

If you'd like to write to the Premier of Prince Edward Island as well, his address is:

The Hon. Joseph Ghiz
Premier of Prince Edward Island
Parliament Building
Charlottetown, P.E.I.
CIA 7N8

Thank you very much for taking the time to write.

Ontario Doctors' Strike and the Toronto Clinics

The Ontario Medical Association called a province-wide strike in Ontario in June to protest the government's plan to ban extra-billing. Although support for the strike from the doctors was not as great as the OMA had hoped, the provision of hospital abortions was severely curtailed. In many areas of the province it was announced that the therapeutic abortion committees would not be meeting and all but emergency surgery would be cancelled. Eventually many hospitals closed completely and emergency departments were only open on a rotating basis. Early in the strike the doctors' actions obviously caused enormous distress to women who were awaiting committee meetings, approval, or the procedure. The Morgentaler clinic and the new Scott Clinic started receiving a much higher number of calls from all over the province. Doctors began calling the CARAL National Office to say they had stopped providing abortions themselves and wanted to refer patients to the two clinics, or that they were unable to find medical care in their area for abortion patients. They were delighted that their patients could get an early appointment at one of the two clinics. Within days of the strike starting, the OMA Executive announced that women needing abortions during the strike should go to the Toronto clinics!

As a result, many members of the medical profession who we knew had privately supported the free-standing clinics came out publicly in their favour. This sent a clear message to the public and to the provincial government that the medical profession knows that women will receive excellent care at both these facilities. It was also clear that most women in Ontario had no where else to go thereby adding enormously to the defense of the necessity of the clinics. The situation regarding the effect of the strike on the clinics followed closely the announcement by the provincial government that it would move against the new Scott Clinic if it opened. However, apart from the questioning of some women leaving the clinics, as part of what the Attorney-General called an "ongoing investigation" there has to date been no action taken.

"The Health Care Accessibility Act" which banned extra-billing was passed in the Ontario Legislature on June 20th and the province-wide strike was called off early in July. The OMA has announced that it is now considering rotating strike actions. It looks as though there is going to be a considerable impact on access to abortion as a result of some doctors' reaction to the passage of the new legislation. Some doctors have said they will no longer perform abortions, others that they will not resume sitting on committees. A Toronto gynaecologist has just announced that he will be charging an "administrative fee" of \$250 to handle all aspects of an abortion - an amount higher than he was charging when he was allowed to extra-bill. Even though the strike is officially over, we hear from staff at the two clinics "you wouldn't know it from here" since they are so busy. CARAL will be monitoring the situation and would be interested in hearing information about abortion access in all parts of Ontario in the coming weeks.

Supreme Court Appeal Date Set and Funds Needed

Dr. Henry Morgentaler's appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada will be heard beginning October 6, 1986. This is an appeal of the Ontario Court of Appeal's ordering of a new trial for Dr. Morgentaler and his associates following his 4th jury acquittal. Funds are needed and we urge you to think about organizing a fund-raising activity in your community. Perhaps a wine and cheese party, or a brunch, or a barbecue, or to hear a speaker. Or a letter-writing party where everyone writes to politicians about the injustice of the abortion law, and participants are asked for donations which should be made out to C.A.R.A.L. with a note stating that the money is intended for the PRO-CHOICE DEFENCE FUND.

If You're Moving

Please let us know. Include your name, previous address and new address and telephone.

You and Direct Mail

You may not be aware that we occasionally trade our mailing list with other groups in order to inform a larger number of people about our work. We limit the number of trades to a few non-profit organizations each year on a one-time basis. However, if you do not want your name included in any trades, please notify the office in writing.