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ABORTIONS — EMOTIONS AND FACT

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EDITORIAL

THE SILENT VOTE

Man's attitude towards moral, ethical and religious issues has always been divided and often times dogmatic.

Each and every person often feels that his line of thinking is the correct one. The Abortion Bill is one such issue which straddles one's moral, ethical and religious beliefs. It is not surprising therefore that there should be disagreement, it is surprising that there should be so much agreement among people of various creeds and faiths.

That there is need to liberalise our present laws on abortion is held by all. The contention lies in when, why and how much.

There has been little disagreement within the S.M.A. Council itself. Some may have preferred a more liberal line and others a more conventional stand but all were prepared to listen to the views of

others. It is indeed with regret that the Council accepted the resignation of Dr. George Wong, the Hon. Secretary.

The important thing is not the diversity of opinion with the S.M.A. which counts but that all these views amongst our members should be heard. The Council never had the intention to silence the members at the last extraordinary general meeting on the 12th January, or to get a "rubber stamp" approval for its views. The Council felt that if discussion were allowed on all aspects of the bill the meeting would turn out to be a marathon session with only a few die-hards staying on till the end and voting on the motion.

The fact that so many of our members stayed away showed that this sentiment is shared by many. Too many of our A.G.M.s and E.G.M.s have dragged on into tests of

mental and physical endurance because of a few garrulous members and pernicky individuals.

The Council as Dr. Gwee rightly points out (see "Storm in a Teacup") has no option but to carry out whatever motions that are passed by the House.

It would be a pity if a minority opinion is made the official stand of the S.M.A. because the majority of our members have decided to stay away. It must be remembered that by not exercising their right to vote, absent members are in fact tacitly agreeing to whatever motion that has been pushed through the House.

It is important therefore that all members attend the next E.G.M. on Wednesday, 29th January, in order that the stand to be taken by our body will in fact represent the true wishes of the majority of our members.

Letter from DR. GEORGE WONG

To The President, SMA.

Dear Dr. Lim,

Resignation from the office of Hon. Secretary of the S.M.A.

At the Council meeting last night I tendered my resignation from the position of Hon. Secretary of the S.M.A., which was accepted by Council. This letter is to confirm this, and to state that it will take effect from to-day, for reasons which I have given to Council.

The reason for my resignation is because Dr. Fred Pais and 60 other signatories have expressed no confidence in the Council by demanding a third E.G.M. to be convened with the purpose of considering Council's memorandum on the Abortion Bill. The Council had taken great pains to draw up a memorandum on the Abortion Bill in conformity to the resolutions passed by the

House, at 2 E.G.M.s. This demand for a new E.G.M. can only be interpreted as "We want to vet every word of Council's memorandum because we do not trust Council to act on our behalf." To me this is an expression of no confidence in the Council. If the Council has no authority to act on a subject which was discussed by the General Body at 2 E.G.M.s then the Council serves no useful purpose. Under these circumstances I cannot continue to hold office.

There are no other reasons for my resignation. I would like to stress that I have no disagreement with the Council. My private views on the Abortion Bill are far more liberal than those set out in Council's memorandum. But I believe in upholding a majority decision, and I abide by Council's majority decisions, even though some of them are

at variance from my own. My resignation is on no account due to this.

I wish to thank Council for their indulgence, and their co-operation throughout my term of office. I have endeavoured to serve the Association to the best of my ability, and I shall continue to do so in an unofficial capacity, by offering to help the new Hon. Secretary in his work, particularly in writing the Annual Report.

Please notify all members, as soon as possible that I am no longer the Hon. Secretary of the S.M.A.

I have no objection, if you wish to quote this letter in such a notification for the information of the members.

Yours sincerely,
GEORGE WONG
14th Jan. 1969

As members of the SMA finally prepare to present their views on abortion to Government with the prospect of a long and stormy E.G.M. in the offing, it might be helpful if members would recognize that (1) to hope for unanimity of opinion would be out of the question (2) to submit only the majority views would not do justice to the minority, whose convictions are no less valid and sincere (3) long debate would serve no useful purpose except fan the flames of emotion, (4) members have had more than ample notice of the proposed abortion act and by now should have come to some decision whether "pro", "anti" or "undecided" on each of the issues at stake.

It would appear then that the reasonable and logical course of action to take at the forthcoming E.G.M. is to conduct an analysis of members' views along these lines.

- (1) Those who are opposed (on religious or other grounds) to any form of abortion.
- (2) Those who see no objection to abortion "on demand".
- (3) Those who accept Section 5(2)(a), 5(2)(c), and 5(2)(d), but wish to debate Section 5(2)(b).

Section 5(2)(b) if accepted as it stands would allow abortion "on demand" and would make (a), (c) and (d) of the same Section redundant. At the E.G.M. on Sunday 12th January 1969, Section 5(2)(b) was rejected by an overwhelming majority. This was unfortunate because with a little modification, it is possible that members would be willing to consider the "environment" as acceptable grounds for termination of pregnancy, as it already is in practice. Continuation of pregnancy in certain situations would lead to total social ostracism, extreme domestic hardship,

wrecking of studies or careers — these are a far cry from abortion "on demand" although both would come under Section 5(2)(b). The substitution of the words in italics for the word "justifies" in 5(2)(b) would make it read as follows: "that the environment of the woman, both at the time when the child would be born and thereafter so far as is foreseeable, is likely to impose additional and grievous hardship on the woman and her family so as to justify the termination of her pregnancy". This modification would then make allowance for the occasional needy case and would legalize what is in reality already accepted and practised by people, religious or otherwise (even though they may not openly wish to admit it).

Lastly, it would be helpful for those who favour the acceptance of Section 5(2)(b) as it stands as a means of population control to know this. Sterilization, a vastly superior and widely accepted method of population control, has not as yet been fully or even adequately employed in Singapore. One of the main reasons is the lack of facilities and co-

Next E.G.M. on Abortion

Wednesday January 29th, 1969. 8.00 p.m.
Pathology Lecture Theatre

Continued . . .

ABORTIONS, EMOTIONS AND FACTS

operation in our Government K.K. Maternity Hospital. It may interest members and others to know that many postpartum women cannot have their tubal ligations done even though they request it, their husbands consent to it, and doctors are prepared to operate. In terms of comparative effectiveness, one postpartum ligation is better than three or even five enrolments at the Family Planning Clinics.

In 1968, hundreds of cases at K.K. Hospital could not have their ligations done. Unless existing deficiencies are rectified to cope with these present demands for ligation, it would be a mockery to press for abortion — a far more difficult, hazardous, bloody, unpalatable and uneconomical procedure. As responsible people, let us get our perspectives right when viewing this controversial subject. □

Letters:

OUR MEDICAL TRAINING

Dear Editor,

I wish to congratulate the editor and those responsible for starting off the Medical Newsletter. Communication between members of the medical profession has been very poor up to date. Doctors are always spending so much time in making headway in their profession, that they do not spend enough time in other matters.

I think the fault lies in an unbalanced form of University education which concentrates on technical details to the detriment of the other aspects of living. When one contemplates that a large majority of the best students (from the examination point of view) go and do medicine, and the medical faculty is completely oblivious of training its students to do anything except increase human longevity — well, is it any wonder that we have people asking for abortions as a balance to this pre-occupation with preserving life?

We were taught only to preserve life from disease when that was a major problem. Now the major problems facing humanity are:

1. Enough food to go around, to stop famine, under-nutrition and malnutrition.
2. Enough jobs to keep people out of mischief, and maintain their self-respect.
3. The preservation of peace to stop irrational, emotional destruction of life and property.
4. The maintenance of justice order to reduce crimes and anti-social behaviour.

Are we going to leave only to others to manage all these problems, or should the medical people not feel any responsibility in helping to solve them? If doctors feel that they are only specialised to preserve life, then they should consider that life can be maintained not only through freedom from disease, but also from freedom of violence, from want and other factors which are inimical to

life.

When we feel that problems are too much for us, we are easily induced to reduce these problems by family planning and go so far as to legalise abortion.

The signs are more than obvious that doctors should be trained to do more than only be obsessed with preserving life. Why not channel some of this energy and desire to do good to lines of activity which need more talents and abilities than can be tapped upon?

In looking back at the medical training I received, the subject which is of least use to myself and I presume to most medical practitioners, is anatomy. Why waste two years at it, when there are more important and useful things to learn, which could be of more benefit to mankind as a whole? Why learn so many details in order to forget them from lack of use? If anatomy is taught intelligently from the point of view of use to the general practitioners, it can well be reduced to a few months. Surgeons no doubt need more knowledge of anatomy, but I am sure they refer to their books before operations to refresh their memories, anyway.

Most GPs do so little surgery that their knowledge of anatomy gets atrophied from disuse and most doctors are general practitioners even in government service. In the first place why bother to spend so much time in the company of cadavers, when what is needed is to learn the numerous techniques of dealing with living beings? The time saved could be more usefully spent in learning psychology, politics, economics, law, etc., and that may save doctors from this myopia of specialisation. The irony of present day life is that the best brains go and become doctors and scientists only to become efficient henchmen.

W.H.C.

Letters:

STORM IN A TEACUP

Dear Sir,

The recent storm in a teacup over the coming E.G.M. called by sixty-one signatories would seem to be a reflection of the lack of awareness of the right, the privilege, and the liability of a Council member. The abortion issue is of such fundamental importance ethically, professionally and otherwise, that in U.K. more than three years were taken by the Royal Commission to produce the Report, and the British Parliament took many months to debate it subsequently.

The B.M.A. and the Colleges not only made representations, but published their views in official journals for the information of all their members. Hence, any member of the S.M.A. demanding to see a report or memorandum produced by the S.M.A. Council does so in good company, for he is expecting the S.M.A. to conduct itself with integrity and honour in the professional bodies. Such

a demand should in fact be encouraged and not be interpreted as a lack of trust or an expression of no confidence.

I am certain our local doctors are vocal enough to express lack of trust or confidence without having to say it indirectly in the form of requesting a further meeting to be informed of a memorandum in the name of the Association, or a report meant for information for the members.

A Council member is elected to represent the general body and to carry out its wishes. As such, he cannot as a rule refuse to make information available to the general body, or speak for it without mandate. The general body surely must have the right to compose, accept, vet, and reject any report or memorandum made under its name, and for a Council member to feel aggrieved with such activity would seem a lack of awareness of the true status of a

council member.

As far as I can see, the situation should be that the Council is bound to speak in the manner the majority of the general body dictates, and any Council member who disagrees with the views of the general body must nevertheless continue to voice such majority views in the official capacity whatever his own views may be; and if his conscience is such that he is acutely disturbed, then the proper course is to resign on the grounds of inability to represent the general body, and not because he feels that the general body should not be contrary.

It is a pity in the zeal to prevent undue and unwelcome publicity, confidentiality of information has been pushed to the absurd limit that members of an association are denied information when they want to know what they are supposed to be saying.

A. L. GWEE.

The Editorial Board does not necessarily endorse all the opinions expressed in this Newsletter.

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