

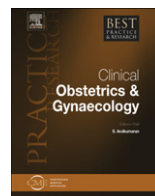


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Historical perspective on induced abortion through the ages and its links with maternal mortality

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Abortion is mentioned in ancient medical texts but the effectiveness of the methods described is doubtful. Attitudes varied from apparent disapproval by Hippocrates to open approval in Ancient Rome. In mediaeval times abortion was practised by women in secret and this continued during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Despite being illegal in England induced abortion became more common in Victorian times as the population grew. At the same time the link between criminal abortion and maternal mortality became increasingly clear, and if a woman died after a procedure the abortionist (sometimes a midwife) could be sentenced to death. The law was more tolerant of abortions performed by registered doctors. In the 20th century pressure grew for its legalisation. At the time of the 1967 Abortion Act, abortion was the leading cause of maternal death in the UK but within fifteen years death from illegal abortion had been abolished.

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Although induction of abortion has been practised for millennia, accurate information is scanty until the 19th and 20th centuries. This chapter summarises what can be gleaned from older sources and then traces the story in more detail from 1800 onwards, when major changes were taking place in society. It focuses mainly on the UK, where the *Lancet* was founded in 1823 and the predecessor of the *BMJ* first appeared in 1840. Both archives have recently been placed on line and these primary sources give graphic accounts of the death toll of criminal abortion and the debate about what should be done about it.

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Pre-modern history

Medical methods were used to induce abortion in ancient times but their effectiveness is doubtful. The Ebers papyrus, from Egypt around 1550 BC, includes remedies for a wide range of disorders and recommends honey and crushed dates, introduced vaginally, to end pregnancy. Methods in Chinese texts appear to have involved the use of herbs (again, of doubtful effectiveness) or mercury, which would have been toxic to the woman. In ancient Greece, Plato (428–348 BC) refers to abortion but is vague about the methods used:

“The midwives, by means of drugs and incantations, are able to arouse the pangs of labour and, if they wish, to make them milder, and to cause to bear those who have difficulty in bearing, and they cause abortions at an early stage if they think them desirable.”¹

Spontaneous miscarriage occurs in about 1 in 6 pregnancies – a high enough proportion to convince women and midwives of the effectiveness of an abortifacient drug or incantation.²

The Greek physicians Hippocrates (c 460–370 BC) and Soranus (2nd century AD) taught that physical exercise could cause abortion. Other methods included massage of the uterus or wearing a tight belt, and Soranus advised diuretics, enemas and venesection. In a review of contraception in Ancient Rome, Hopkins³ consulted 26 medical writers of whom 15 (including Hippocrates) gave methods for abortion. Plants with alleged abortifacient properties included silphium, which was harvested to extinction in Roman times, and hellebore (“Christmas rose”), an ingredient of so-called “abortion wine”. Hellebore has poisonous constituents and can cause death.⁴

There is little evidence of surgical abortion but Soranus’ advice against using sharp instruments suggests that the practice had at least been tried. Tertullian of Carthage states that among surgeons’ tools were an annular blade and a hook for extracting the fetus. “Such apparatus,” he says, “was possessed by Hippocrates .. and even the milder Soranus himself” but they sound more like instruments for treating obstructed labour by extracting the fetus “when lying awry in the orifice of the womb he impedes parturition and kills his mother”.⁵ Instructions for instrumental abortion are contained in Persian texts of the 10th century.⁶

Attitudes to abortion varied. Aristotle wrote that it should be carried out before “sense and life have begun in the embryo” – ie. before quickening (fetal movement) is felt. The ancient Greeks worried that limiting family size would endanger population growth.¹ The Hippocratic Oath appears to oppose abortion, though some argue that it refers to only one specific method.⁶ In the early Roman empire the population declined despite an apparently ample food supply, suggesting a highly effective method of fertility control.⁶ This decline was restricted to upper-class Romans, according to Hopkins, who concluded that they used effective and ineffective contraceptives in addition to “the unashamed practice of abortion” and perhaps also infanticide³

During the Dark Ages the status of women declined and contraception and abortion were contained within a women’s culture. Midwives providing such services were periodically persecuted as “witches”.⁶ After the Renaissance, the medical profession in Western Europe became entirely male-dominated and women were excluded from universities. The University of Paris barred women from medicine in 1220, and the University of Cambridge, founded in 1209, did not award degrees to women until 1947.

The secrecy surrounding abortion continued until the modern era. Because of the secrecy, the cost and the ineffectiveness of abortifacients, an unmarried woman might try to keep her pregnancy secret and dispose of the baby. Pregnancy concealment was against the law:

“In the sixteenth century every unmarried woman concealing her pregnancy even, was guilty of felony, and in the reign of James the First an Act was passed by which the jury were obliged to convict on presumptive evidence. This Act continued in force for nearly ninety years. In 1809, the concealment of pregnancy was declared to be merely a misdemeanour, punishable with imprisonment not exceeding two years; and the same proofs as in charges of ordinary homicide were declared to be necessary to convict a woman of child murder.”⁷

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