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## ABORTION - 40 YEARS ON

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This year is the ruby anniversary of our dreadful 1967 Abortion Act. There is nothing to celebrate. This is the legislation that has sanctioned the death of some 7 million unborn children throughout England, Scotland and Wales.

Abortion is a gruesome practice, unworthy of any civilised society. We should all be ashamed that we ever allowed it to occur – and then to let it continue for so long. The latest figures show that there were 201,173 abortions in England and Wales during 2006 – these were performed on 193,737 resident women plus 7,436 non-residents. This was a record total and the first time the 200,000 barrier has been breached.

While there can be no redeeming features from the grim facts, there are some recent crumbs of consolation that may, just may, point to a change of heart among some.

In April, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) warned that Britain could be facing an abortion crisis because an increasing number of doctors and nurses are refusing to get involved. The staid RCOG reported that it was aware of ‘the slow but growing problem of trainees opting out of training in the termination of pregnancy and [that it] is therefore concerned about the abortion service of the future.’

In the May 2007 issue of its own journal – the *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* – it reported a 10-year analysis of abortions performed in the West Midlands on the grounds of foetal abnormality. It revealed that 102 (3.2%) babies from the total of 3,189 abortions were born alive – surviving for an average of 80 minutes, but for as long as six hours at the extreme. Such live births occurred in 18 out of 20 maternity units throughout the West Midlands. Is that any way for the RCOG to attract trainees into the abortion industry?

Also in May, in an issue of the GPs’ magazine *Pulse*, were published the results of a survey. It seems that a quarter of UK doctors are refusing to refer women for terminations and more than

half said that the current 24-week abortion limit should be reduced because medical advances mean that babies born before that cut-off time are capable of survival.

Earlier in the year, the Howard de Walden estate, owner of many of the properties on the UK's most famous medical district, Harley Street, where more than 3,000 medical practitioners work, banned its tenant-doctors from performing 'lifestyle' abortions on its premises. It is these 'lifestyle' or 'social clause' abortions which account for more than 90% of the total currently carried out in the UK. Harley Street is the area where many of the pre-1967 abortions took place – where having a 100 guineas and knowing the 'right' person were the entrées to a termination. Now it seems that some of the well-to-do are beginning to abhor abortion.

Apparently, this change of heart is all to do with ethical distaste and growing religious convictions. Among healthcare workers it has led to an increase in 'conscientious objectors' who request exemption from the ghastly task.

Although public opinion still remains largely in favour of abortion provision, and though repeated political attempts to tighten the law have failed, if there are insufficient abortionists, the practice may begin to shrink. No practitioners – no practice.

Predictably, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, which carries out a quarter of all UK abortions, believes the government should do more to 'motivate doctors to train in abortion.' But instead of treating these 'rebel' doctors as a problem, should we not be listening to them? Abortionism is a low-grade, undemanding profession, healing nothing. It does seem that the younger generation of doctors and nurses (and others) are beginning to understand and reject the abortion trade. That is a sizeable crumb of good news.

Meanwhile, in the USA, abortion rights have already been restricted for the first time since the 1973 Roe v Wade legislation. In April 2007, the US Supreme Court voted 5-4 to uphold a nationwide ban on 'partial birth abortions'. These are a particularly grisly type of late-term abortion, where the unborn child is pulled out feet first, the head crushed and the brain sucked out to ease the extraction of the rest of the body. It is the first time that the Supreme Court has intervened in the doctors' choice of abortion methods.

Most commentators agree that this landmark ruling, which has been fought over in the lower courts since 2003, could provide the impetus to tackle the colossus of Roe v Wade.

This happy crumb of news comes after a series of minor victories against abortion since President Bush came to power. For example, South Dakota has already passed a law banning most types of abortion. Other states have started to outlaw it too. For instance, in the whole state of Mississippi, with a population of about three million, there is now just one abortion clinic remaining, incongruously called the Jackson Women's Health Organisation.

Many doctors and nurses in the US, as well as swathes of ordinary citizens, have long detested the practice of abortion, mainly on religious grounds. Some 120 million US citizens say they attend a place of Christian worship every Sunday, and 22% of Americans regard abortion as a key issue in the upcoming 2008 presidential elections. More than 60% of the US electorate want either stricter limits or a complete ban.

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**Salt and Light Papers** is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

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