

Abortion Then and Now: New Zealand Abortion Stories from 1940 to 1980

Dame Margaret Sparrow

Reviewed by **Hilary Weeks**, general practitioner and certifying consultant, Medical Director Auckland Medical Aid Centre (AMAC), 1991–2004.

This unusual and, at times, somewhat disturbing book will be of interest to both the public and to anyone providing abortion services, including the general practitioner or referring doctor.

The author, Dame Margaret Sparrow, is well known for her long career in general and reproductive health, and has been recognised for her services to medicine and the community. Her theme is that unsafe self-induced, and illegal abortions must never be allowed to return to New Zealand (NZ), and that safe humane services of a high standard must always be provided. She feels there is still a stigma attached to abortion and a need to dispel some of the secrecy that surrounds it. Her intention is to bring a “healthier perspective to a very common female experience”.

The first half of the book contains 70 personal stories of women seeking abortion in the early decades. There is an introductory essay written for each decade, with accounts of the illegal abortionists, their Court trials and also Coroner’s inquests into the many tragic deaths from septic abortion, often self-induced.

I find it noteworthy that in the 1940s there were on average about 25 deaths per year from septic abortion. This death rate was reduced in the 1960s by the advent of antibiotics, but in the 30 or more years since the opening of the Auckland

Medical Aid Centre (AMAC) in 1973, no deaths have been reported from abortion in NZ.

The second half of the book contains accounts from the doctors, Police and the many advocates and activists who worked to bring about change. It details the history of the setting up of AMAC, the resulting court cases, Parliamentary debate, and eventual legislation of the present CS&A Act of 1978.

As a doctor emigrating to NZ from England in 1972, and arriving to a country where it was extremely difficult to obtain a medically safe abortion for one’s patient, I immediately found myself involved. Therefore, for me, this book is both extremely interesting and also easy to read. It is well researched, well written and organised, as one would expect of an author of this calibre.

I would suggest that not only referring doctors, but also any doctors who still feel that they are unable to support their unhappily pregnant patient in their request for abortion, would find this groundbreaking book of value to read.

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