

# The Myth of Mass Back-Alley Abortion Deaths

One of the most common arguments abortion advocates make in defense of legal abortion is that making abortion illegal will cause women to go to the "back alleys" and obtain unsafe abortions. They cite how thousands of women died as a result of unsafe abortions before abortion was legalized through the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision.

We already know legal abortions are not safe - they can and do cause women to lose their lives and harm women physically and emotionally. So let's address some other issues.

Dr. Bernard Nathanson, co-founder of the National Abortion Rights Action League, admits his group lied about the number of women who died from legal abortions when testifying before the Supreme Court in 1972. *"We spoke of 5,000 - 10,000 deaths a year.... I confess that I knew the figures were totally false ... it was a useful figure, widely accepted, so why go out of our way to correct it with honest statistics?"*

That claim of thousands of maternal deaths due to illegal abortion doesn't measure up when compared with other statistics. About 50,000 women of child-bearing age die each year -- from all causes combined. To suggest that 10,000 of these deaths were from illegal abortion would make that the cause of one out of every five deaths, or twenty percent. This would have made illegal abortion the leading cause of death among women in that age group.

What, then, did cause abortion-related deaths due to illegal abortions? According to data from the National Center for Health Statistics, the legalization of abortion was not responsible for reducing abortion-related deaths. This discovery of antibiotics in the 1940's did that by providing effective treatment for infections.

The National Center for Health Statistics reveals that before 1941, there were over 1,400 abortion-related deaths. Yet after penicillin became available to control infections, the number of deaths was reduced in the 1950's to approximately 250 per year. By 1966, with abortion still illegal in all states, the number of deaths had dropped steadily to 120. The reason? New and better antibiotics, better surgery and the establishment of intensive care units in hospitals. This was in the face of a rising population.

Between 1967 and 1970, sixteen states legalized abortion. In most it was limited, only for rape, incest and severe fetal handicaps or deformities, and when the pregnancy jeopardized the life of the mother (all of which constitute only 5% of the abortion cases today). There were two notable exceptions - California in 1967 and New York in 1970 legalized abortion on demand.

Legalizing abortion should have eliminated some deaths related to illegal abortions. That is not the case. In the years from 1963-1969, there were an average of approximately 55 deaths per year due to illegal abortions. In 1970, after this initial wave of laws legalizing abortions, there were 109. Deaths from illegal abortions *increased*.

By the year before the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision allowing legal abortion on demand in all fifty states, the death rate for illegal abortions had fallen to 24 in 1972 (with 25 additional deaths as a result of legal abortions).

Now abortion was legal in all fifty states and back alley abortions eliminated with their alleged total of maternal deaths. In 1973 there should have been a sharp drop in abortion-related deaths if abortion advocates were right that legalizing abortion would make abortion safe.

Yet abortion-related deaths increased again with 25 deaths resulting from legal abortion in 1973, 26 in 1974 and 29 in 1975. Some have claimed that the number of illegal abortion-related deaths were not reported accurately or underreported.

Yet, when a woman was seriously injured by an abortion, she went to another doctor for care. The abortion practitioner was rarely involved at that point. The new doctor in many cases had to attempt to save the mother's life. In cases of maternal death, this new doctor was required to report, and falsification of the death certificate was a felony. Therefore, prior to legalization of abortion, it's safe to say deaths from illegal abortions were rarely covered up.

Yet, even if the case can be made that deaths resulting from illegal abortions were underreported, it is equally safe to say that deaths resulting from legal abortions are underreported. In Maryland in 1991, there were four women who died from legal abortions that year. None of the four were reported to the Federal Centers for Disease Control for its statistics. Whereas prior to the legalization of abortion a second doctor, with little or no reason to cover up a death for which he or she was not responsible, was involved in an attempt to save the mother's life; with legalized abortion the abortion practitioner is usually the one attempting to save the mother's life when the abortion threatens her life.

Other specific instances help us see how reporting for the number of deaths related to illegal abortions may be low: In 1977 an Ohio doctor noted that while the official statistics showed no abortion-related deaths in Ohio that year, he personally knew of two. If one doctor knew of two cases, how many were there really?

Abortion was legalized in California in 1967. According to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1972, official records showed four legal abortion-related deaths in the entire country from 1967 to 1972. Yet a reporter for that paper uncovered three deaths only in Los Angeles in just one month in 1972. A reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times* uncovered 12 legal abortion-related deaths in that city in 1978. The government statistics show only 16 deaths for the *entire country* in that year.

Another important point is that many of the abortion practitioners performing abortions after *Roe v. Wade* were the same people performing illegal abortions. In the July 1960 edition of the *American Journal of Public Health*, an article by Dr. Mary Calderon, then medical director of Planned Parenthood, which stated:

"90% of illegal abortions are being done by physicians. Call them what you will, abortionists, or anything else, they are still physicians, trained as such; ... They must do a pretty good job if the death rate is as low as it is... Abortion, whether therapeutic or illegal, is in the main no longer dangerous, because it is being done well by physicians."

Here is a candid admission that not only are illegal abortions not being done by quack doctors but that the death rate from illegal abortions was "low." This flies in the face of claims of several thousand women losing their lives to illegal abortions and the claim that illegal abortions were performed by quack doctors and not by physicians.

As we can see, "Never again" never was. There were not several thousand women losing their lives due to illegal abortions performed by quack doctors. Effective medical treatments helped reduce abortion related deaths and the legalization of abortion never played a significant role (and never will) in affecting the numbers of women who died from legal or illegal abortion-related deaths. That women continue to die from so-called "safe, legal" abortions (perhaps in greater numbers than we know) is a clear indication that abortion is unsafe and hurts women - legal or otherwise.

**Sources:** National Center for Health Statistics. Health, United States, 1994. Hyattsville, Maryland: Public Health Service, 1995.

Abortion Surveillance 1985, Center for Disease Control, Table #18.

Induced Abortion: World Review 1983, by Christopher Tietze, The Population Council, p 103

Maternal Mortality Surveillance 1979-1986, Centers for Disease Control, M&M Weekly report July 1991, Vol. 40, No. SS-1.