

A Brief History of Abortion

In 1973, abortion became a legal choice in all 50 states.

The U.S. Supreme Court issued the ruling that legalized abortion.

Here is what that ruling (*Roe vs. Wade*) says:

"We recognize the right of the individual, married or single, to be free from unwarranted governmental intrusion into matters so fundamentally affecting a person as the decision whether to bear or beget a child. That right necessarily includes the right of a woman to decide whether or not to terminate her pregnancy . . ."

— United States Supreme Court, January 22, 1973

Was the Supreme Court ruling based on accurate information? How did women obtain abortions before 1973?

Even before the Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Roe vs. Wade*, trained physicians performed the vast majority of abortions.

Some people say that if abortion were illegal, women would be at risk for "back alley" abortions by untrained amateurs posing as physicians.

In 1960, however, before abortion was legal, Mary Calderone, then-medical director for Planned Parenthood, wrote that trained physicians performed "90 percent of illegal abortions".

(Source: M. Calderone, "Illegal abortion as a public health problem," American Journal of Public Health, July 1960, 50 (7): 949.)

How many deaths from illegal abortions were there before 1973?

You've probably heard that tens of thousands of American women died through illegal abortions before 1973.

Dr. Bernard Nathanson, an early leader in the abortion rights movement and abortion provider for many years, tells a different story in his 1979 book, *Aborting America*:

"How many deaths were we talking about when abortion was illegal?"

"In NARAL (The National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League), we generally emphasized the drama of the individual case, not the mass statistics, but when we spoke of the latter it was always "5,000 to 10,000 deaths a year."

"I confess that I knew the figures were totally false, and I suppose the others did too if they stopped to think of it. But in the "morality" of our revolution, it was a useful figure, widely accepted, so why go out of our way to correct it with honest statistics?"

Some early abortion rights activists vigorously dispute the estimated number of illegal abortion deaths prior to 1973.

Feminist author and activist Lucinda Cisler, writing in the 1970 book *Sisterhood is Powerful*, put the number much lower: "Another statistic that is bandied about for all the right reasons — but with much unwarranted confidence — is the figure of 10,000 U.S. abortion deaths per year before abortion was legalized.

"A study made in the 1930"s, before the development of antibiotics made even illegal abortion less deadly than it used to be, came up with this number of 10,000 deaths; but it is no longer anywhere near the truth and has no place in any serious discussion about abortion.

"The most accurate estimates are that 500-1,000 deaths occurred each year because of septic abortions, and this range takes false reporting strongly into account."

Did you know . . .

- That every woman has the right to know about the complications from abortion and problems afterward that can threaten her life?
- That, when compared with other medical procedures in the U.S., abortion is the most unregulated?
- That, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, abortion is the most frequently performed surgical operation in our country?
- That women still die from legal abortion.