

Another “Call the Midwife” blog post from this CtM junkie

The 8<sup>th</sup> season of “Call the Midwife,” which concluded recently, dealt significantly with illegal abortion through several of the episodes. Given the current assault on women’s reproductive rights that is occurring in many US states, this theme was particularly timely.

In its usual fashion, the series dealt with a difficult topic with compassion. It contrasted three competing concerns. First, the desperation of the women seeking an illegal abortion; they were normal women caught in a situation that they felt was beyond their capability to manage. Second, the practical feminism of the woman who served as the abortionist; she was an elderly woman who felt called to help the impoverished women of her neighborhood. And third, the duty of the midwives caught between compassion for all of these women and the demands of the law. It also illustrated the life-threatening consequences of illegal abortion which we have not had to deal with in the US since the mid-1970s. As women’s health care providers, these are complications we may need to face again in many American states.

In the US, abortion policy is often viewed through the lens of the Catholic Church and other evangelical churches who insist on theological grounds that life begins when a sperm penetrates an ovum. In ancient Jewish times, life was felt to begin with quickening. In my first job in women’s health in 1974, we could not confirm a pregnancy unless a woman was at least 6 weeks past her last menstrual period, provided us with first morning urine, and we rolled the specimen for 3 minutes. We didn’t realize how very often what appeared to be a “late” period had actually been what we now call a chemical pregnancy resolving itself. Was a “life” lost?

Modern fertility options, sonogram machines, DNA testing, and incredible advances in neonatal care have all made the issues of when life itself begins and when the life of the mother and the fetus are distinct much more difficult. In my 40 years of experience, women struggle with their choices. They act with careful deliberation and agonizing awareness of the magnitude of their decisions. No one who doesn’t have to live with that choice for the rest of their life should be involved in it.

Thank you again to “Call the Midwife” for its compassion and sensitivity in dealing with a very difficult topic.