Psychological outcomes for women following abortion

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Abortion

• Difficult decision
• Different reasons for abortion
• Different gestations & methods
• Different personal, social, economic, cultural
• Alternatives childbirth & adoption/ raise child
Mental health and abortion
‘ No effect’

• ‘most methodologically sound studies indicate that severe negative reactions after legal non-restrictive first trimester abortion are rare and can be best understood in the framework of coping with a normal life stress’

– American Psychological Association 1989
Gilchrist et al 1995

- Prospective, longitudinal, cohort study
- RCGP/RCOG, Great Britain
- 13,261 ‘unplanned’ pregnancies (1976-1987)
- Large sample size (n=6410 abortion)
- Comparison groups (n=6151 not request abortion, n=379 denied abortion, n=321 changed decision)
- Psychosis, depression & anxiety, DSH
Gilchrist et al 1995

- Total psychiatric disorder
- Rates depression/anxiety
- No different abortion and childbirth
- Psychosis less likely following abortion than childbirth (1.1 vs 4.1)
- Women with past psychiatric history increased risk regardless of abortion /childbirth
- DSH higher refused/or abortion cf childbirth? Confounding- ?coexisting social difficulties reason for seek abortion
Mental health and abortion ‘Positive effect’

• Zabin et al 1989
• 360 teenagers USA
• Abortion vs. childbirth, 2 yrs later:
  • Abortion more likely graduated
  • Abortion group better off economically
Mental health and abortion ‘Negative effect’

- *Fergusson et al* 2006 *J Youth & Adolescence*
- 25 yr longitudinal study (N=630)
- Cohort born 1977, Christchurch, NZ

- 1. Self reported reproductive history 15-25 yrs
- 2. Measures of mental disorders - depression, anxiety, phobia, suicidal behaviour
- 3. Confounding factors - family, child abuse
Abortion group (c.f childbirth group):

- Higher rates of depression
- Suicidal ideation
- Illicit drug dependence
- More mental health problems in total

- Design flaws:
  1. Wanted-ness/intention of pregnancy not controlled
  2. Multiple abortions not separated from single
  3. Likely under-reporting abortion
‘Is there a post abortion syndrome? 
*New York Times 2007*

• 1981 Vincent Rue
• ‘Post traumatic stress disorder following stress of abortion’
• ‘Severe and ongoing emotional reaction to an extreme psychological trauma’
Report of APA Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion
2008

• Systematic review, 50 studies since 1989
• English language, peer review articles
• Quantitative data, induced abortion, >= 1 post abortion mental health measure
• Abortion vs comparison groups
• N=25 secondary analyses of public data sets/records
• N=19 primary research
• N=6 fetal abnormality

- Mental health problems - clinically significant disorders eg. Depression, anxiety disorder, psychosis
- Negative psychological experiences eg. Regret, sadness, substance misuse
Questions:

1. Does abortion cause harm to mental health?
2. How prevalent are mental health problems after abortion?
3. What is the RR of mental health problems post abortion vs. alternatives?
4. What predicts individual variation in psychological experiences?
Methodological issues in abortion research

• 1. *Comparison and contrast groups*
  - Few studies used appropriate groups
  - Denied abortion, deliver unwanted, adoption

• 2. *Co-occurrence of risk factors*
  - Few studies adequately assessed/controlled
  - Unwanted pregnancy co-occurs with adverse circumstances and mental health problems

• 3. *Sampling*
  - Volunteer samples bias, small data sets
  - Secondary analyses eg. inaccurate prevalence mental health problems in general population
4. Reproductive history and under-reporting

- Many self report eg. survey data
- Stigma - under-report
- Women most distressed may:
- Less likely report ? underestimate negative
- More likely report ? overestimate
- Under specification of gestation & reason eg. Later gestation - more pain, complications, delay-ambivalence, anomaly
5. Outcome measures & statistical analysis

- Some used poor measures mental health
- eg. ‘ever abused drugs or alcohol? Yes/No’
- Timing of measurement - varied, unspecified
- Retrospective reporting of health/emotion
- Many focus only on negative outcomes
- Multiple statistical testing
- Loss to follow-up – most distressed lost - underestimate negative effect & vice versa
APA Task Force 2008
Findings

• 1. RR mental health problems in women unplanned pregnancy, single first trimester abortion, no greater than if deliver

• 2. Multiple abortions equivocal evidence. Risks predispose woman multiple unwanted pregnancies and mental health problems
APA Findings

• 3. Late abortion for fetal abnormality
• 6 studies - small sample sizes (23-83)
• Higher anxiety/ depressive symptoms than healthy child, but similar to late miscarriage
• Less than those deliver undiagnosed child with life threatening abnormalities.
APA Findings

• 4. Differing psychological experiences terminating unwanted vs. wanted.

• 5. Some women do experience sadness, grief, depression, anxiety, but no evidence abortion causal.
APA Findings

6. Predictive factors negative psychological response: perceived stigma, low social support, pre-existing mental health problems, personality (low self-esteem, denial), characteristics of pregnancy, intendedness/wantedness.

7. Same factors predict negative psychological response after childbirth.
Conclusion

• Need: Well designed, rigorous scientific research
• Sufficiently large
• Critical variables intended-ness
• Positive and negative psychological
• Disentangle confounding factors
• Establish RR abortion vs. alternatives
• Challenge: diversity, complexity women and circumstances