Abortion linked to mental problems

By Julie Robotham Medical Editor
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HAVING an abortion as a young woman raises the risk of developing later mental health problems - including depression, anxiety and drug and alcohol abuse - according to the most detailed long-term study to date into the divisive question.

The results could undermine the legal basis for access to abortion in jurisdictions, including NSW, in which termination is legal only if continuing the pregnancy would threaten the woman's physical or mental health, said David Fergusson, the leader of the New Zealand study.

The findings tipped the balance of scientific evidence towards the conclusion that abortion increased psychological distress rather than alleviating it, said Professor Fergusson, who supports unrestricted access to abortion and describes himself as "an atheist, a rationalist and pro-choice". That could make it more difficult for doctors to claim they were performing an abortion on health grounds, he said.

"There'll be cheering for our results on the pro-life side and denouncing us angrily on the pro-choice side," said Professor Fergusson, a psychologist and epidemiologist at the Christchurch School of Medicine and Health Sciences. "Neither of those positions is sound."

He said the study was conducted to address the dearth of reliable evidence on the mental health effects of abortion. "The issue is not a trivial one," he said.

"Abortion is the most common medical or surgical procedure young women undergo by far [and] there are potential adverse reactions. The aim of our research was never political. It was to say, 'The science in this area is not good. Let's add to it'."

The findings come from the Christchurch Health and Development Study of 1265 children tracked since birth in the 1970s. The researchers found 41 per cent of the more than 500 women remaining in the cohort had become pregnant by age 25 and 14.6 per cent had sought an abortion. In total, 90 pregnancies were terminated.

At age 25, 42 per cent of those who had had an abortion had also experienced major depression at some stage during the previous four years - nearly double the rate of those who had never been pregnant and 35 per cent higher than those who had chosen to continue a pregnancy.

The risk of anxiety disorders was raised by a similar degree, while the women who had had at least one abortion were twice as likely to drink alcohol at dangerous levels compared with those who had not terminated their pregnancies, and three times as likely to be dependent on illicit drugs. The study was published this week in the *Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology*.

Professor Fergusson said the results had surprised him, but they were statistically strong. Separate analysis had confirmed the mental health problems followed abortion - not the other way round.

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The study, funded mainly by the New Zealand Government, had assessed the young women's mental health regularly through adolescence, and had also considered their family and educational circumstances.

It was plausible that abortion might trigger mental illness, he said, because it could be a traumatic life event and involve loss - both of which are linked to increased psychological problems.

Edith Weisberg, the research director of FPA Health, formerly Family Planning NSW, said the research was disturbing and important, but it also had limitations. Some women might not have mentioned their abortions, the effects might be different for older women, and the study had not explored why the women had terminated their pregnancies or their attitudes to abortion, she said. "The reason they had the abortion may be more of a problem than the abortion itself," she said.

THE NUMBERS

- Annual abortion rate - 80,000-90,000.

- 62 per cent of people surveyed by Southern Cross Bioethics Institute support abortion on demand; 87 per cent want abortion rate cut.

- The Federal Parliament will consider whether to remove a ban on abortion pill RU486.

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