

Abortion and mental health

A study examining the links between abortion and mental health, suggests women who undergo an abortion face a 30 per cent increase in the risk of developing common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

The study from the University of Otago's Christchurch Health and Development Study (CDHS), was a follow-up from earlier research published in 2006 which found that women who had abortions had about 1.5 times the rate of mental health problems than those who did not.

CDHS Executive Director Professor David Fergusson says the earlier study had its limitations because they were not able to compare women having abortions with women who had unwanted pregnancies that came to term. To address this issue they conducted a further study that was published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

The study found, in the women followed up until the age of 30, that major mental health problems in those who had abortions were about 30 per cent higher than in women not having abortions.

The findings suggested that while abortion was associated with increased rates of mental health problems, there was no significant association between unwanted pregnancy coming to term and mental health, after due correction for confounding factors.

The study looked at a range of mental health problems including depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal behaviours, alcohol abuse and illicit drug problems. Substance abuse problems were the most commonly associated with having undergone an abortion.

Dr Fergusson says that in terms of overall population effects, the impact of abortion on mental health is small and their findings fall into a very much a middle-of-the-road position on abortion.

"The results suggest two conclusions. First, abortion is an adverse life event that is associated with a modest increase in risks of mental disorder. Second, the mental health risks of abortion may be greater, and are certainly not smaller, than the mental health risks of unwanted pregnancy that comes to term."

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Professor David Fergusson

Key words:

- Pregnancy, mental health, abortion

Aims of this research:

To follow-up on earlier research (published in 2006), which found that women who had abortions had about 1.5 times the rate of mental health problems than those who did not, to then compare this with women having abortions with women who had unwanted pregnancies that came to term.

Findings

- Study found in the women followed up until the age of 30, that major mental health problems in those who had abortions were about 30 per cent higher than in women not having abortions
- The rate of mental health problems in women having unwanted pregnancy did not carry significant risks
- Suggests that while abortion was associated with increased rates of mental health problems, there was no significant association between unwanted pregnancy coming to term and mental health
- Substance abuse problems were most commonly associated with having undergone an abortion

