

Abortions on L.I.—A Progress Report

By NADINE COHODAS

Fifteen minutes after her abortion at a clinic in Hempstead, L. I., a 16-year-old girl from New York City explained why she had chosen the clinic for the procedure instead of a hospital.

"It was cheaper and a hospital would have taken two days," she said. Although the girl's mother knew of her pregnancy, her father did not, and neither helped raise the \$150 her clinic abortion cost.

"If I had gone to a hospital, I couldn't have explained to my family why I'd be gone two days," the girl added. "Then my father would have known."

Last year, 16,593 women had abortions on Long Island and, like the young woman from New York, more than half of them were aborted in nonhospital clinics in Nassau County.

Despite the popularity of the clinics, however, they have come under fire from Long Island municipalities that have passed local laws banning abortions except in hospitals.

The ordinances, which followed liberalization of New York's abortion law in July, 1970, are currently in effect in the Cities of Glen Cove and Long Beach, the Towns of North Hempstead, Hempstead and Oyster Bay in Nassau County and in the Towns of Huntington and Babylon in Suffolk County. In addition, the Suffolk County Board of Health has passed a resolution restricting abortions to hospitals or hospital-affiliated clinics.

A similar ordinance has been overturned in Hempstead Village, where it was challenged by the Parents Aid Society, one of three abortion clinics on Long Island. The town regulations are being challenged by the other clinics—one in Garden City and one in Westbury—which last year performed most of the abortions on Long Island.

The Garden City and Westbury clinics have been able to continue doing abortions pending an appeal of the two ordinances. But the clinic in Hempstead Village had been enjoined from doing them when the village ban was upheld in May by State Supreme Court Justice Joseph Suozzi. His ruling was reversed recently.

In New York City abortions are restricted to hospitals, clinics that have back-up hospitals within a ten-minute ambulance ride and independent clinics that have blood banks and full-time anesthesiologists and professional staff members.

Backers of the local ordinance say they are concerned for the welfare of residents who might want abortions and fear the establishment of what they believe are inadequate storefront clinics.

Donald Kehoe, the public information officer of Oyster Bay, which adopted its ordinance last July 27, said that the Town Board had received many letters indicating concern about clinics.

"There appeared to be a growth of

medical centers which become abortion centers," Mr. Kehoe said. "The town felt they wouldn't be equipped for overnight care if overnight care was needed.

"The whole thing was not a stand against abortions. Rather it was a concern for the health of the patient. There was no attempt to circumvent the law. We support abortions in hospitals, not in storefronts."

The Long Island Right to Life Committee, a four-year-old organization that says it has 16,000 members, has been opposing abortions—in hospitals or not—through an educational pro-

gram. "We've held seminars at high schools, grade schools and public libraries," said John Carlin, a lawyer who is chairman of the organization.

The group also puts out a newsletter six times a year and has produced a "futuristic film," Mr. Carlin said, "which shows the ultimate consequences of taking the rights of a child—our attempt is to show the horrors of abortion."

"We're against abortion because it is taking an innocent human life," Mr. Carlin added. "A child is a human being and abortion destroys basic human rights."

For pregnant women who do not want abortions, Catholic Charities, the largest nongovernmental social agency on Long Island, has a maternity counseling service in both Nassau and Suffolk and a residence in Port Jefferson where women can spend the last two months of their pregnancies.

"Most of the girls we see [about 380 each year] are in some kind of conflict," said John Sullivan, director of the family services division, which runs the counseling program. "But the conflict is usually, 'What do I do now that I'm pregnant?' rather than 'Shall I abort or not?'"

Figures from the Nassau County Board of Health indicate how popular the clinics are. Of the 14,545 abortions performed in Nassau last year, 8,832 were performed in the Garden City and Westbury clinics, and most of these for out-of-state women.

This represents an increase of 10,000 abortions over the six-month total of 1970.

The 2,048 abortions reported last year in Suffolk County, which has no non-



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hospital clinics, were largely for women who live in the county, said Peter Backman of the county's health board. Only 121 procedures were for non-Suffolk women, but Mr. Backman said that 901 Suffolk women went out of the county for abortions.

There were 1,500 abortions in Suffolk in 1970.

Both counties report that the hospitals are able to take care of all women seeking abortions. And Dr. William Finn, chairman of the abortion review committee of the Nassau Obstetrical and Gynecological Society, said Nassau hospitals, like those in Suffolk, last year handled abortions almost exclusively for resident women.

"Ninety-one per cent of the Nassau women who had abortions in 1971 went to Nassau hospitals," Dr. Finn said, "and the hospitals tell me they can do twice as many abortions as they are now."

Unlike New York City where the 1971 abortion rate nearly equaled the birth rate, Nassau and Suffolk report many more resident births than abortions. In Nassau there were 12,225 live births, triple the number of resident abortions. Suffolk reported 18,216 live births, nearly 10 times the number of abortions among residents.

But Dr. Finn said legalization of abortions had reduced the number of illegitimate births. Citing 1971 birth and abortion figures for women under 20—in the past the "prime source" for adoptive babies—Dr. Finn said there were 767 abortions and only 899 live births.

Suffolk reported a drop of 72 in the total number of illegitimate births, from 768 to 696.

No Deaths Reported

Neither county reported any deaths among women last year as a result of abortions, and Dr. Finn said Nassau hospitals were seeing fewer emergency cases as a result of badly done abortions. "In the first six months of legal abortions, there were major complications in one half of one per cent of the abortions," Dr. Finn said. "It's down now to one-tenth of one per cent."

Representatives from the clinics counter charges that they are unequipped to handle medical complications that might arise. James Corcoran, administrator of the Eastgate Medical Center in Garden City, which last year performed 6,166 abortions, said his clinic could handle any medical problem because of its affiliation with Long Island Doctors Hospital.

An abortion at the year-old clinic costs from nothing to \$180—that for a saline abortion for women at least four months' pregnant.

Most Are Unmarried

The clinic has 6 gynecologists, 3 anesthesiologists, 2 general practitioners, a pathologist, 14 nurses and 5 counselors. According to Nassau figures, 95 per cent of the abortions at the clinic were done for out-of-state unmarried women who were 18 to 30 years old.

The smaller clinic in Westbury, which is headed by Dr. Saul Bilik, performed 2,726 procedures last year—2,556 for non-Nassau County women. In addition to Dr. Bilik, an obstetrician, the 18-month-old clinic has another obstetrician, a general practitioner and two nurses.

"Most of the out-of-state patients come to the clinics through referral services which list the Nassau facilities," said Jack H. Schneider, administrator of Dr. Bilik's clinic. These include Planned Parenthood and the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortions, a national organization of Protestant clergyman.

"Ten to 20 per cent of our referrals are by previous patients," Mr. Schneider added.

Like the Eastgate clinic, the cost of an abortion at the Bilik clinic is based on the ability to pay and the length of pregnancy, which determines the abortion procedure. The average fee is \$175, which includes laboratory work, medication and a follow-up visit, according to Alan Sterenfeld, an attorney for the clinic.

Complications Called Minimal

William Baird, director of the center in the Village of Hempstead, also contested the argument that clinics were unequipped to handle complications. "Medical complications? You can have them with having a tooth extracted or with getting penicillin," Mr. Baird said. "It's not so much where abortions are done, but the skill of the people involved."

A 23-year-old woman who recently came to the Parents Aid Society from Cambridge, Mass. — she learned of the clinic through a newspaper ad—agreed with Mr. Baird. "I felt comfortable and found everyone very helpful," the woman said shortly after her abortion.

"I chose the clinic mainly because a hospital was more expensive and I couldn't see spending two days there for a 10-minute operation.

A clinic abortion usually is cheaper than one performed in a hospital. A hospital abortion ranges

from \$125 for a procedure requiring a local anesthetic and no overnight stay to \$385 for a saline abortion requiring at least a 48-hour stay in the hospital. The same abortion in one of the clinics would be \$175 to \$200.

Another factor is the immediacy with which an abortion can be done in a clinic. At the Parents Aid Society no permission is required for any woman. In the Eastgate and Westbury centers, a woman under 18 must have parental permission, but no married women needs to have her husband's permission for an abortion.

Although it is not a standard 35 Long Island hospitals doing abortions require either parental permission for young unmarried women or permission from the husbands of married women.

"This is just a legal precaution," said Dr. Michael Buscemi, deputy health commissioner in Suffolk.

"And the matter of permission may be up to the physician," Dr. Buscemi said. "It's his right and prerogative to take or not to take the risk of performing an abortion."