



1977

Cook, M., 2011b

Abortion

## Controversy: 1974 to 1980s

In 1974 access to abortion became easier when New Zealand's first abortion clinic opened. There was fierce support for women's right to abortion and equally intense opposition. People took sides, using arson, harassment and abuse, court cases, police raids, street marches and pickets, acts of Parliament and vigils.

### Rate

The number of known abortions climbed rapidly through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1971 the rate per woman was 0.02. By 1986 it was 0.30.

### First abortion clinic

The Auckland Medical Aid Centre (AMAC) opened in 1974, providing abortions in the first trimester (1-14 weeks) of pregnancy. After referral by their own doctor, women were assessed by a doctor at the centre, provided with counselling and, if approved, had the operation. Once a woman reached AMAC, the process took two days; later it would take only one. It was a private clinic, and women had to pay \$80 in 1974 (\$731 in 2009 terms).

In its first year AMAC provided 2,288 women with abortions; the following year this rose to 4,005. In part, this very rapid rise was a result of a clamp-down in Australia on New Zealand women's access to Australian government-subsidised abortions.

### A new method

AMAC introduced the use of vacuum aspiration (sucking out the womb's contents). The very low rate of infection and damage to the uterus made this method a particularly safe procedure.

### Opposition to AMAC

Repeated attempts were made by those opposed to abortion to close AMAC. Police raided the centre, Parliament passed restrictive legislation and an arson attempt caused \$100,000 worth of damage.

### Police and the courts

The courts were used in attempts to restrict abortion. In the two most notable cases this backfired, and access to abortion was eased.

3rd The Auckland Medical Aid Centre (AMAC) was raided in 1974, Jim Woolnough, one of the centre's doctors, was prosecuted. The Court of Appeal upheld his acquittal, it was on the basis of his sincere belief that the abortions performed were necessary.



Pro-abortion march  
(1st of 4)



Royal Commission  
on Contraception,  
Sterilisation and  
Abortion, 1976



Abortion Supervisory  
Committee, 1978



In 1982 Dr Melvyn Wall went to court to prevent a 15-year-old from having an abortion. He lost the case, and a subsequent Appeal Court judgment found that Wall did not have the right to represent the foetus.

## Abortion law

Parliament considered several abortion bills in the 10 years from 1974 to 1983. Two were passed.

The Hospitals Amendment Act 1975 was a direct response to AMAC. It limited provision of abortion to licensed hospitals. The act forced AMAC to close, but it re-opened after buying a private hospital. The act was later ruled invalid for technical reasons.

### Big-bellied blokes

Labour MP Mary Batchelor was the only member of Parliament to oppose the Hospitals Amendment Act 1974. 'There are 83 men and four women voting on this bill', she said, 'and the men will never have to carry anything heavier in their bellies than a good meal.'<sup>1</sup>

By 1975 abortion had become such a political hot potato that Parliament set up a royal commission to consider it, along with contraception and sterilisation. The Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act 1977, based on the commission's recommendations, made getting an abortion more difficult. The act proved difficult to implement, and was amended in 1978.

### Setting up a system: 1977 onwards

Women had to see their doctor, then two certifying consultants, both of whom had to agree that her physical or mental health made an abortion necessary. It was also necessary to find a surgeon to perform the operation.

Counselling had to be available for the woman, and some clinics required women to see a clinic-employed counsellor. The Abortion Supervisory Committee was formed to appoint certifying consultants and license abortion clinics.

### Sisters Overseas Service

The Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act 1977 forced AMAC to close for several months. Within days, women set up the Sisters Overseas Service (SOS). SOS helped women travel to Australia for abortions in 1978 and 1979.

### Cross-Tasman alert

Abortion was also a hot issue across the Tasman, and links between Australian and New Zealand activists were close. A 1974 warning to New Zealanders about a Sydney doctor was typical: '[H]e is a very bad operator – made a terrible mess of a young girl who had to spend the week in hospital, he would not help her when she went back to see him after the op'.<sup>2</sup>

### Abortion clinics open

The Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act 1977 also required health boards to fund lawful abortions. In 1978 and 1980 hospital boards in Auckland and Wellington set up their own abortion clinics. AMAC re-opened in 1980. Lyndhurst Hospital in Christchurch, a public abortion clinic, was opened in 1986.

## Married or single?

From the mid-1970s information about the kinds of women who had abortions became available. The number of unmarried women seeking abortions increased. However, as de facto relationships were increasingly common, these women may not have been single.

## Age and race

In this period women aged 24 and younger were most likely to have an abortion. The rate then steadily tailed off. Pākehā women typically had an abortion at a young age to end an unwanted pregnancy. Māori and, to a greater extent, Pacific women's use of abortion differed. They were more likely to use it as a back-up for contraception throughout their fertile years.

### Footnotes

1. Quoted in Hayley Brown, 'A woman's right to choose: second wave feminist advocacy of abortion law reform in New Zealand and New South Wales from the 1970s.' MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 2004, p. 81. Back
2. Quoted in 'A woman's right to choose,' p. 63. Back

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