



Abortion and Mental Health – Beware Flawed Research

A précis by Women's Health Victoria

New Zealand researchers Fergusson, Horwood & Ridder (2006), reported a possible causal link between exposure to abortion and mental health problems in their paper *Abortion in young women and subsequent mental health*. However, a peer-reviewed paper *Unwanted pregnancy, mental health and abortion: untangling the evidence* (Dwyer & Jackson 2008)¹, finds that the New Zealand research was flawed and therefore the conclusions should not be used to inform policy.

The New Zealand study contains a crucial design flaw – the research did not have access to information about the *wantedness* of a pregnancy – abortion and unwanted pregnancy being highly correlated.

Dwyer & Jackson state the authors of the New Zealand study appear to have been well aware of the weakness of their evidence acknowledging the study's failure to control for *wantedness* of pregnancy but saw this oversight as a limit rather than a fundamental design problem.

Dwyer & Jackson conclude:

- Policy must be informed by research that is based on sound science
- Distinctions between moral and public policy positions must be made
- Women have the moral capacity and right as citizens to make decisions about their reproductive lives including pregnancy
- The health and equity impacts of prohibitionist policies on abortion are unacceptable
- There is evidence from a number of studies that poorer mental health status is associated with pregnancy and parenting in the teenage years
- Adolescent parenthood is associated with a higher incidence of psychiatric disorders
- Much of the available literature rejects that abortion causes poor mental health but finds that unwanted pregnancy is a stressful experience

¹ Dwyer, J M, Jackson, T, 'Unwanted pregnancy, mental health and abortion: untangling the evidence', *Australian and New Zealand Health Policy* 2008, vol. 5, no. 2 [Epub ahead of print], viewed 12 May 2008, <http://www.anzhealthpolicy.com/content/pdf/1743-8462-5-2.pdf>