

Epidemic played large role in shift of attitudes on abortion, author says

June 25 2010

Before Roe v. Wade, there was ... German measles.

Ten years before the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion - which likely will be a focus of Senate confirmation questions for Supreme Court nominee Elena Kagan next week - German measles probably played the biggest part in starting to shift [public attitudes](#) about the criminal abortion laws, University of Illinois historian Leslie J. Reagan says in a new book.

Where abortion had been illegal and shameful, it became a subject of open public discussion and debate, Reagan said. In the midst of a German measles epidemic, the most "respectable" women - married, middle-class, white mothers - began to openly speak of their pregnancies, their concern about having a child with severe malformations, and their need for abortions, she said.

Joining them with vocal support for reforming the abortion laws was a diverse coalition difficult to imagine today - including, for instance, the PTA, Republicans, unions, medical associations and a long list of Protestant churches.

But that history, like German measles (also known as rubella), has largely been forgotten, according to Reagan, a professor of history, of law and of women's studies.

"German measles ends up being very, very important for the earliest

beginnings of the abortion-rights movement," she said. It also played an important role in the movement for disability rights, she said.

"(I)ts legacies have been written into the U.S. social infrastructure; into law, medicine, science, and social movements; and into contemporary politics," Reagan writes in "Dangerous Pregnancies: Mothers, Disabilities and Abortion in Modern America" (University of California Press). "German measles became a catalyst for bringing about fundamental changes in the culture, public health and constitutional law."

Reagan traces the story from the discovery of the link between the disease and birth defects in 1941, through the 1963-65 epidemic and its consequences, and through the development and promotion of a vaccine in the late 1960s and after. In doing so, she also places it within the context of the long history of abortion, of women's attitudes about pregnancy, and of society's deep-seated fears about disability and its consequences.

German measles, an innocuous childhood disease, produced so much anxiety not because its symptoms were serious, but because they weren't, Reagan said. "A woman might have it and have no symptoms. But if she caught the virus during pregnancy, it could harm the developing fetus."

Among the potential outcomes were miscarriage, infant death or serious birth defects, including deafness, blindness, heart malformations and mental retardation, she said. And few supports existed at that time to aid families in caring for or educating children with disabilities.

"These were very frightening potential outcomes, and they shook the public's confidence that most babies would survive birth and be healthy and normal," Reagan said. "The epidemic frightened every pregnant woman in the country, and every woman who thought she might be, or

might become, pregnant." Extending those fears to the husbands and families of those women meant a large part of society was affected.

For many families and doctors, there was no question that if they were facing serious [birth defects](#), they should abort and try again, Reagan said. But getting a legal "therapeutic" abortion involved going through hospital review boards for permission, and that permission was hard to get.

Illegal abortionists also were difficult to find because of increasingly tough enforcement of anti-abortion laws, in place since the late 1800s, Reagan said. Even the safe practitioners who had operated for decades without attention from the law were being closed down during this period.

Before the epidemic, women who had had abortions had been portrayed often in the media as "sexually deviant, racially suspect and psychologically sick," Reagan wrote. Magazine and newspaper coverage of abortion associated it with crime, the mob and much-maligned African Americans, Reagan found.

In the wake of German measles, however, the women beginning to talk about their families, anxieties and abortions, and seeking legal change, were far from that mold, Reagan said.

"The early abortion-rights movement began at this time, with this concern for expectant mothers, and for families who appeared to be the perfect, idealized 1950s, 1960s family," she said. "To have the group that was seen as inherently respectable and moral talking about abortion really did change, I think, the picture of abortion - from deviant to respectable - and thus changed the public discussion."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Epidemic played large role in shift of attitudes on abortion, author says (2010, June 25)
retrieved 1 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2010-06-epidemic-large-role-shift-attitudes.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.