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LATE

a research study of women undergoing abortion between 19 and 24 weeks gestation

abortion

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Marie Stopes International

Marie Stopes International is the UK's leading provider of abortion services outside the NHS, seeing almost one third of all cases in England and Wales each year.

The organisation currently has nine centres in Greater London, Leeds, Manchester, Bristol, Reading, Maidstone and Essex and has been a pioneering force in improving women's access to, and choices in, abortion treatment and care over the past three decades.

As a registered charity and not for profit organisation, surplus funds from Marie Stopes International's UK operations are devoted either to improving services in the UK or in support of a Global Partnership currently working in 39 countries across the developing world, providing sexual and reproductive health services to approximately 4.5 million people every year.

thanks

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introduction

Late abortion, that is abortion conducted at 20 or more weeks gestation, is rare, making up just 1.6% (2,927 of 181,582) of all abortion procedures carried out for residents in England and Wales in 2003.

Almost 90% of abortions were carried out at 12 weeks or less gestation¹. Late abortion has always been the subject of much discussion, yet there has been little research that addresses the important question:

Why do women present late for abortion?

Recently, late abortion has been hotly debated in both the media and the political arena. This debate has singularly failed to take account of the experiences of women undergoing late termination of pregnancy, instead focusing on the viability of the foetus, scientific advances in neonatal medicine and the alleged nature of late abortion methods.

The foetus has become the centre of the debate, to the detriment of any real consideration of the emotions, reasoning and experience of women seeking abortion at later gestations.

This publication presents the findings of research into the circumstances surrounding the decision to undergo late abortion of women attending two Marie Stopes International (MSI) centres at 19+ weeks gestation. At MSI, clients having abortions between 19 and 24 weeks undergo the same two stage surgical procedure, and are free to go home on the same day.

The research illustrates the situations that lead to late abortion, and examines the processes women go through, from identifying the unwanted pregnancy to seeking and undergoing abortion.

Women taking part were also asked to explain exactly what it would mean for them if they couldn't have accessed late abortion; the implications on their lives; and their views on moves to lower the upper gestational limit for abortion in the UK, currently set at 24 weeks.

the foetus has become the centre of the debate to the detriment of women

¹ DOH. 2004. *Summary abortion statistics 2003*.

methodology

Women of 19-24 weeks gestation attending either of the two MSI centres in London which perform abortions up to 24 weeks gestation were invited to take part in the study. All research was carried out on the day the procedure took place. At one centre (West London), face-to-face interviews were conducted, using open questions to explore women's experience of late abortion. At the other centre (South London), women were asked to complete a questionnaire, which consisted of 13 tick boxes of reasons for having the termination later in pregnancy and four open-ended questions. Research was carried out between January and April 2005.

key findings

- for the majority of women taking part in this study, the signs and symptoms of pregnancy were not recognised until an advanced stage, making late abortion an inevitability rather than a conscious choice on their part
- others put recognisable pregnancy symptoms down to other physiological factors peculiar to them, such as a history of erratic periods, a recent pregnancy, or the consequences of using particular methods of contraception
- a small minority of women taking part were aware of the pregnancy at an early stage but were either in denial, or subsequently faced a significant change in their circumstances that forced them to re-evaluate their pregnancy

- some women reported significant delays in accessing services once a pregnancy had been detected and a decision to terminate made - these included encounters with obstructive medical practitioners and protracted waiting times for consultations etc. This caused considerable distress and anxiety to those women affected by such delays
- many of the women taking part found the decision to terminate particularly difficult to make, and reported taking a considerable amount of time to fully consider their options before deciding to proceed with abortion
- most women did not act in isolation, but consulted and were supported by partners, family and friends
- most women reported a combination of factors influencing their decision to terminate - every woman's situation was unique and most felt that they were the only person capable and qualified to make the decision
- considerations of the impact of continuing the pregnancy on partners and existing children exercised a significant influence on most women's decision to seek abortion
- the vast majority of women felt that the current legal upper gestational limit of 24 weeks should be left intact, and that to have been unable to access services because of a change in the law would have caused emotional trauma - two respondents even reported that they might have taken their own lives
- many women feel that the media's depiction of abortion is biased and unfair, and called for more balanced and considerate treatment for women who find themselves in this situation.

many of the women found the decision particularly difficult to make

summary of findings

Quotations are taken either from transcripts of the face-to-face interviews or from the self-completed questionnaires. A total of 26 face-to-face interviews with clients have been included in the analysis and 84 women completed questionnaires.

Knowledge of the pregnancy

Women undergoing late abortion were asked to describe their experiences of finding out that they were pregnant; what signs or symptoms lead them to detect the pregnancy and what they did to confirm it.

- in the vast majority of cases the pregnancy was not recognised until very late on

'I didn't even know I was pregnant until 18½ weeks'
(age 22)

- many women said that they did not notice any symptoms of pregnancy until late, usually well into the second trimester

'I had no symptoms of pregnancy. I did not gain weight, I did not experience nausea and until two weeks ago I didn't even notice a bump, considering I'm 20 weeks pregnant'
(age 22)

- women who did notice symptoms of pregnancy attributed these to other causes, such as weight gain over Christmas, or stress causing an absence of periods

'I didn't miss any [periods] until January... I mean I put on a bit of weight over Christmas, but who doesn't ?'
(age 19, gestation 22 weeks)

'I didn't think too much about having missed periods as I'd experienced this before for about eight months... I was tested for PCOS [polycystic ovary syndrome] but it turned out it was stress related. [I] assumed, following a negative test, that my lack of period was stress related' (age 27)

- a number of contraceptive methods disrupt menstrual bleeding patterns and may cause occasional bleeding or cessation of menstruation completely. In such situations, some women may believe they are not pregnant

'I've been on the mini-pill which means you don't actually get periods so I didn't have the classic case of periods stopping and thinking, you know, that it was something to worry about'
(age 42, gestation 22 weeks)

- a small group of women had become pregnant very soon after the end of a recent pregnancy, whether it had ended full term or sooner. This group of women put potential signs and symptoms of pregnancy down to breastfeeding and bodily changes following their recent experiences

'When I initially found out I was quite late... because I've just had a baby... for some reason just nothing pointed to me being pregnant again'
(age 41, gestation 21 weeks)

- a number of women reported that they still had some bleeding throughout the pregnancy. These women did not feel therefore, that menstrual change could have been used as a recognisable sign that they were pregnant

'I continued to have periods up 'til I was four months not knowing I was pregnant'
(age 27)

'My period is always irregular and erratic, sometimes I don't even have it for two months so I was not aware of anything'
(age 35, gestation 23 weeks)

- some women were given inaccurate information regarding contraception

'I was breastfeeding and waiting [as instructed by GP] for my period to come so I could put an implant in... I'm waiting and waiting and I think; hang on a minute, I'd better check [to see if she was pregnant]'
(age 34, gestation 20 weeks)

MSI comment:

- women undergoing late abortion generally do not find out about the pregnancy until late, often due to irregular periods or continued bleeding
- women need access to accurate information about all appropriate methods of family planning. In particular, women need information regarding return to fertility following the end of pregnancy, whether through delivery, abortion or miscarriage. Women who are breastfeeding also need information on appropriate methods of contraception
- women need to be informed of the variability of symptoms of pregnancy, not only between women, but also between pregnancies.

The decision to undergo termination

Previous research by MSI into the decision making processes leading up to abortion shows that up to 17 weeks into the pregnancy, women are certain of their decision to terminate and generally discuss this with others, often partners².

- whilst the same is true for some women undergoing late abortion, the current research showed that when a pregnancy is late in the second trimester, the decision is generally difficult from the outset
- it was important to the women that they were given the time to think through their decision
- having been through the experience of late abortion, women strongly expressed their belief that others in a similar situation should be given enough time to think through their decision and the options available to them, in order to make an informed choice
- for the most part, women are not alone in their decision making, as partners, family and friends were often sources of help and support

'I was weighing up my options... I wrote down everything, the dos and the don'ts, you know, the great things that would happen if I did have the baby and it's just all the things that were negative overruled the positive'
(age 21, gestation 21 weeks)

'This decision was hard and harsh to make' (age 45)

'I didn't find out until 16+ weeks and I'm definitely glad I had time to think it through properly. There's no way I would have been able to decide in a week'
(age 23)

'I'm sure nobody makes the decision lightly'
(age 42, gestation 22 weeks)

'It's a very difficult decision to make. The extra time is often needed. Better that than unwanted children' (no age given)

'My husband - he's been very supportive; he knows what I want to do; and then my friend was very supportive as she has gone through this as well'
(age 35, gestation 23 weeks)

- in the context of making a decision, it's clear that every woman perceived her situation to be different, and that the choice to terminate the unwanted pregnancy was based upon different, and often multiple, factors having an impact on that woman's situation at that time. This was verified by face-to-face interviews which found every woman's situation and decision making process to be different

'People have different circumstances and it takes a lot of courage for someone to admit this is actually what they want to do and go through with it... until you are put in the situation yourself you can't really judge, you can't say what's right or wrong until you're there'
(age 21, gestation 20 weeks)

'Until you are in the situation I think you are unable to give an opinion'
(age 20)

- there was not one single factor leading to late abortion, but for most women it was a combination of factors, often including late recognition of pregnancy and either time needed to make the decision or a change in circumstances. This combination of circumstances led to each woman reporting a unique experience. Many reported that they had not thought that they themselves would ever undergo an abortion. Nearly all women commented that they believe it is impossible to make a judgement until the situation is personally experienced

'Unless you have been through an unwanted pregnancy I do not feel you should comment on it as everyone has their own opinions and different circumstances' (age 23)

'I think all cases should be viewed individually. I don't think there is a right or wrong. I never expected to find myself in this situation and now understand just how distressing it is and what a hard decision it is to make' (age 37)

² MSI. 2004. *Women's experience of the abortion process* (forthcoming).

- a small group of women ignored the pregnancy and wanted it 'to go away', not believing it was true. They didn't want to face the unwanted pregnancy. These women explained, retrospectively, that they were in denial of the fact that they were pregnant

'When I found out I was pregnant I just wanted to forget about it. But I contacted my GP to be referred to have a termination. But why I left it so long was I hoped it would go away and I didn't have to make a decision'
(age 23)

- some women had originally planned their pregnancy, but a change of circumstances drove them to make a decision to terminate at a later stage. These women found out about the pregnancy much earlier, usually in the first trimester. However, having the choice to abort the pregnancy later on was important to them

'My partner is violent but when he found out I was pregnant he promised he would get help and change and for a few weeks he did but he then beat me with a baseball bat so I don't think it's right to involve a child in that'
(age 24)

MSI comment:

- women generally find the decision to have a late abortion hard to make
- it is important that women are supported in their decision making and given time to choose
- every woman presenting late for abortion has a set of individual circumstances that place them in that situation. Each woman's circumstances and each pregnancy are very different.

Arranging and having the abortion

- once women decided that they wanted a termination, support was found from doctors and other healthcare professionals who showed understanding and referred speedily for the procedure
- there were, however, many examples of women being delayed throughout the referral process. Getting a speedy appointment with a doctor to confirm the pregnancy and to arrange referral was one source of delay

'My GP was a bit concerned at first because he couldn't understand why I'd left it so long when I first told him, but I explained about my partner and he said "Oh, I see, I understand now" and was really supportive of it'
(age 21, gestation 20 weeks)

'I had to move homes and GP. It was difficult to register with a local GP in the area that I moved in. That was the main cause of the delay. I contacted the GP as soon as I registered. By then I had already missed three periods'
(no age given)

'I did a home test on Thursday, couldn't get an appointment with my GP until Tuesday. Didn't get a hospital appointment for a further three weeks. Was a shock when I had a scan and it said I was 20 weeks' (age 35)

- getting results from pregnancy tests and from tests for foetal abnormality can prolong the process of confirming the pregnancy and delay the decision to terminate

'Because of my age I had an amniocentesis done. This was done at 16¹/₂ weeks. It took two weeks to get the result - the baby had Down's syndrome. It took one week to make arrangements - this is why my pregnancy went to 19¹/₂ weeks' (age 45)

- a small group of women highlighted cost as an issue, as it was difficult for them to get the money together to fund their abortion if they had not arranged referral through their GP. Clients coming from overseas must also meet the additional costs of travelling to the UK

'First I contacted a private clinic and I was told that it will cost me about £400 at that time (14 weeks). While I was trying to get this money together I was on my 17th week and it was about £600. Only then was I told to go to the GP and get registered with a doctor'

(age not given, woman had arrived in the country just 6 months ago)

- being refused a referral by a doctor was a major difficulty for some women seeking late abortion. Some of the women interviewed who were shown a lack of support by their GP were shocked at the attitudes they came across (previous research by Marie Stopes International showed that almost one in five GPs (18.1%) considered themselves 'broadly anti-abortion', and that as many as two in five (39.7%) thought that the decision to abort in the second trimester should lie not with the woman, but with one or two doctors only).³

'She [the doctor] wasn't very nice at all... she said to me "What about adoption?" and I said I really couldn't and she just said that there were so many women that, you know, couples that wanted kids and I was being selfish'

(age 24 gestation 22 weeks)

'The doctor I went to see refused to give me a referral letter... it was horrifying because she just said it was too late for your abortion but I know the legal limit is 24 weeks and I was only about 20 weeks'

(age 35, gestation 23 weeks)

- being refused a referral by a doctor had a strong impact. Women were made to feel ignored and blocked in achieving what they wanted, and in recounting this to the interviewer, some became very upset

'The first doctor I went to, she was just not willing to listen to a reason, she didn't want to know why... at the end of the day it's our choice, they should be more sympathetic... they should refer us to someone who is more sympathetic and able to understand our situation'

'To be honest with you, it put me back a bit. It's bad enough being further on than normal but for it to take longer because of somebody else...'

(age 41, gestation 21 weeks)

- getting the appointment for the termination itself could also take time, something that these women do not have when pregnancies are discovered late

'I decided to go through the NHS which took three weeks to get a consultation date and a further two weeks to do the termination'

(age 25)

³ MSI. 1999. *General Practitioners: attitudes to abortion.*

It is worth highlighting the situation in Ireland, from where two of the face-to-face interviewees had travelled in order to have a termination. It is illegal for anyone to have an abortion in Eire; however, women can receive counselling about their options. Northern Ireland was left out of the Abortion Act of 1967 and the current law is ambiguous, leaving doctors to use their individual judgement.

- one of the clients from Ireland who was interviewed had been delayed through her contact with an organisation which she later found was anti abortion, but which she had contacted in the hope that they would help. As a result of this she was 20 weeks pregnant at the time of her termination, having confirmed her pregnancy much earlier

'We rang some group in Ireland, well it was from the phone book in Ireland, but they were absolutely no help to us and sent us on a wild goose chase for the last two weeks... they said you had to go twice so I just said "Okay, I'll go twice" just to get that out of the way, but then they wanted to talk to my father... and they wanted me to see someone else and eventually I just got sick of it'
(age 18, gestation 20 weeks)

MSI comment:

- GPs must either immediately refer women requesting late abortion, or speedily refer them on to someone who will. Whilst the majority of women are supported in the referral process by a health professional, some are refused or obstructed and this has a severely negative impact on the women involved
- delays can be experienced at all stages during the process of arranging a termination, resulting in some women being pushed over the 19 week threshold into late abortion. Effort should be made by all healthcare professionals to streamline referrals and access to services for those presenting at later gestations.

The impact of not being able to have an abortion and issues of responsibility

Women were asked:

What would it have meant for you, if you could not have gone through with the termination today?

- women responded to this question in several ways. They acknowledged that they would have had no choice but to continue with an unwanted pregnancy. Two women interviewed face-to-face, however, talked about taking their own lives if abortion hadn't been an option for them

'I was getting low and hated myself. And I wouldn't have thought twice about taking my own life'
(age 23, gestation 20)

Generally, responses to this question can be divided into three different areas:

1. The impact on the women's own lives
 2. The impact upon their partners and existing children
 3. The potential impact on the child itself, if the pregnancy was carried to full term
- the answers given to the question indicated that women felt a high level of responsibility in their decision to abort. Whilst personal factors were mentioned, the impact of carrying the pregnancy to full term on partners, existing children, and on the potential child resulting from the unwanted pregnancy were clearly thought through in many of the testimonies
 - women were clear about their personal situations and whether they felt they were in a position to bring up a child or not. Emotionally and physically, women realised the extent to which their lives would be affected and talked about not being able to cope

'I wouldn't have had a life; I would have been very depressed'
(age 23, gestation 22 weeks)

'I couldn't physically or mentally have coped and that's why I've had to go through with it'
(age 38, gestation 20)

- other factors specific to the individual were mentioned such as study, age, finance and partner support

'I've only been with my partner for six months now... and neither of us are ready to take on that and I'm doing my degree... something I really want to finish... I'm not really ready for a child at the moment'
(age 24, gestation 22 weeks)

- women who already had children wanted to keep the quality of the relationships they had without stretching themselves by having another child

'I didn't really think about it much because I know that I can't cope with it... it's not fair on the other children because they're not getting the love... I mean it's the ages you've got to look at. You know, if they were old enough then that's a different case but they are still like, there are two of them that are still babies'
(age 32, gestation 20 weeks)

'I love my girls so much... I'm doing this for the right reasons and the right reasons for my other two children'
(age 24, gestation 22 weeks)

- the impact of another pregnancy on both partners as well as existing children was taken into account

'If the law had been lowered it would have meant I would have had to have the baby which not only affects me, but also my partner and, more importantly, our own children's needs'
(age 23)

'If I had not been able to have a termination my daughter and I would have lost our house and all our security. She is my priority' (age 37)

- women expressed high levels of concern over bringing an unwanted child into the world. The impact of not being able to go through with the abortion would create unwanted children and resentful mothers

'I would have resented the fact that I had to have it. That's the bad thing about it. I know I would have resented it and I don't want to feel like that about my children'
(age 34, gestation 20 weeks)

'I have no income and no desire to bring a child into a life without hope'
(age 20)

'I would have been forced to have a child that was unwanted and that I was unable to care for' (age 20)

MSI comment:

- women undergoing abortion late in pregnancy are acting responsibly and feel a strong sense of duty towards their existing children, their partners and any future children
- women undergoing late abortion are looking to the future and making the decision that they believe is best for the long term wellbeing of themselves and their families.

Case Study 1:

Rachel* is married and 42 years old. She found out that she was pregnant at 22 weeks gestation.

'I found out last week that I was pregnant which I found absolutely amazing. I've been on the mini-pill, [progesterone only pill], which means that I don't actually get periods so I didn't have that classic case of periods stopping and thinking that there was something to worry about.

The first thing I noticed, about three months ago, was that my boobs were really sore and I had a cold. I went to the doctor and told him about my sore boobs and the cold, but he just said they weren't related and that I had sinusitis which he gave me some drugs for. Then, about six weeks ago, my boobs were really, really hurting again so I went back and saw a different doctor and she checked me for lumps, but found nothing. She asked me if I could be pregnant and I told her it was unlikely as I'm on the pill. She said that the reason my boobs were hurting was probably because of the type of pill that I'm taking and that because I had put on some weight, my boobs had got more tender.

I decided to go on a diet as I was going on holiday, but I only lost two pounds in three weeks. I just put it down to my age - people say it's harder to lose weight as you get older. I was parading around in my bikini and though I had a bit of a pot belly, it was nothing more than when I've put on a bit of weight in the past. Then I noticed that it started to get hard and then I really started to worry, but I still didn't suspect I might be pregnant.

I went to my doctor again when I got back, and this time she felt my belly and said I was pregnant and that I should buy a test to confirm it. After doing the test I went back to her later that day and she made an appointment for me to see the midwife two days later.

I completely panicked. I've never wanted to have children and have never had any maternal feelings at all. My partner is the same. We discussed it the day I found out and agreed that termination was the only option. We worked out that he would be 65 and I would be 58 by the time the child left school. I'm really too old to start to bring up a child. I know my husband wouldn't have left me if we had to have it, but I know it would have meant the end of our marriage.

My doctor wasn't supportive at all. She told me I'd find it really difficult to get a termination as I was so far gone. It was the secretary at the doctor's surgery who got me the appointment at the centre for that afternoon. I didn't take much notice of all the abortion things that are going on, I never related it to me.

I think it's really important that the legal limit shouldn't be lowered. I didn't find out until I was 22 weeks, through no fault of my own. I'm sure nobody takes the decision [to have an abortion] lightly, there are so many individual circumstances. Everyone's got a good reason and no one should condemn them for making their own choice. I would never try to advise a woman who was in my situation; it must be her own decision.'

1:

'I think it's really important that the legal limit shouldn't be lowered. I didn't find out until I was 22 weeks, through no fault of my own.'

** Case study names have been changed to maintain confidentiality*

Gestational time limits

Women were asked to give their views on the upper gestational time limit of 24 weeks, up to which abortion is permitted in the UK.

- given their views on the highly negative consequences had termination not been available to them, it is unsurprising that the women felt very strongly that abortion up to 24 weeks was their right and that the legal limit should remain the same

- the women highlighted their individual situations as many of them did not discover they were pregnant until late in the second trimester. A criticism of a proposed reduction in the upper legal limit was that the time available for making a decision and arranging the abortion would be severely limited

'At the end of the day we are all entitled to freedom of choice' (age 24, gestation 22 weeks)

'I believe that many women like me would be disadvantaged by this. I didn't even know I was pregnant until 18¹/₂ weeks... I think that a woman should have the right to choice no matter what, so long as her reasons are ethical reasons' (age 22)

'I don't think they should bring it [the upper gestational limit for abortion] down because you've got to look at the situation and what the woman's going through... if a woman goes ahead with a baby, that baby could suffer' (age 32, gestation 20 weeks)

'Until last Wednesday I had no idea I was pregnant. By that time it was 22 weeks. If the cut-off point had been 20 weeks, then you know my life would have been ruined' (age 42, gestation 22 weeks)

'People who say after 20 weeks you can't do it just haven't been there and they don't know the individual circumstances. I'm sure nobody makes the decision lightly, everyone's got a really good reason and nobody should condemn people for making that choice' (age 42, gestation 22 weeks)

- overall, women saw abortion up to 24 weeks gestation as their right, and the current research shows the negative consequences that they felt they would experience if forced to continue with the unwanted pregnancy

'I think it should stay at 24. Some people may want to keep the baby originally, but due to circumstances in their life, they may wish to have a termination. This can happen in the later stages of pregnancy' (age 24)

'It's a woman's right to go up to 24 weeks, no-one should be able to make up someone's mind. What do people want - unwanted children?' (age 26)

MSI comment:

- Marie Stopes International cannot support calls for any reduction in the current 24 week legal limit in the absence of a considered debate around the entire legislative framework governing abortion
- no woman requests abortion at 19+ weeks for frivolous reasons. All have thoroughly compelling reasons for doing so and have thought carefully about their decision. As a society we should have compassion and offer our full support to them in making this most difficult of choices.

Case Study 2:

Lauren is 21 years old and has a three year old son. She found out she was pregnant at four weeks gestation.

'I went to the health centre for a general check-up and they told me I was about four weeks pregnant. I was with my boyfriend at the time and we were both very excited. We were living together and we weren't using any contraception. We were happy about the pregnancy at first, but then my boyfriend started to get really frustrated and told me to get rid of it. He started taking all his anger out on me and my child and that's not right. My son is only three and if there's anyone to blame it's me. It made me feel really upset. Then my boyfriend said that if I didn't get rid of it he was going to leave and then he left anyway, even before I'd made my decision. I went back to live with my parents, they've helped me out a lot.

My doctor was really supportive. When I went to her and told her my situation she did a scan and found that I was fifteen weeks. I really didn't know what I wanted to do. She told me that I had up to 24 weeks, but she would prefer that it was done sooner. But she gave me the time to decide, which really helped. Without that time I really don't know what I would have done, it was something I really had to think deeply about. My mum and my cousin really helped me and said they'd support me whatever decision I made. They said it had to be up to me to decide what's best for me and my son. I really had to think about my child, I want him to have a better life, to grow up to be really smart.

I couldn't have done this any earlier. If I had it would have been a spur of the moment decision. I really had to weigh up my options, I wrote down everything, but it's not easy. I just had to close myself off from everyone and really think and think about it.

If I couldn't have done it [had an abortion] I don't know what I would have done. Probably committed suicide. I will never go through this again; it's a terrible situation to be in. Everyone's got a different story and if you haven't been there, you'll never understand the thoughts that go through our minds. It's not an easy decision to come to, there is so much stress that you have to go through. It really does hurt to know that other people want the limit to be lowered. I don't know if those people have ever been in the situation like me, but it's terrible. I can't think I'll ever love anyone ever again. From this point onwards I am solely focussing on my child.'

2:

'If I couldn't have done it [had an abortion] I don't know what I would have done. Probably committed suicide.'

Depiction of abortion by the media

Women undergoing late second trimester abortion were asked to explain what they thought about the way abortion is portrayed in the media. Three main themes emerged:

- the women felt that the media has a biased, negative attitude towards termination
- abortion is only ever discussed as a one-sided debate
- there is a lack of support in the media for women choosing abortion.

'The media have recently been pressurising and frightening women like me and trying to attach a stigma to termination. Women should be given support, not bullied'
(age 24)

'Abortion is more widely talked about and accepted than it ever used to be which is good. But it's still not talked about with enough of a two-sided debate'
(age 20)

'It is not an easy decision to make and I think the media should support us for the right to choose. After all it's us women who have to live with the decision for the rest of our lives'
(age 27)

'Despite [the fact that] I knew I was making the right decision, I felt ashamed to tell people close because of the guilt and shame created by the media' (age 27)

Case Study 3:

Jade is 14 years old. She found out she was pregnant at 21 weeks gestation.

'I didn't have any symptoms of pregnancy, except my periods stopped. I didn't have any sickness or anything; I just thought I was ill or something. My mum noticed that I hadn't had my period and then when I started getting fat, I just thought it was 'cos of Christmas.

I really didn't think that I was pregnant, 'cos I was taking the pill. I just missed some days 'cos I stayed at friends' houses and forgot to take it with me. It was just my mum got me to do a pregnancy test, but it wasn't clear whether it was negative or positive. Then she said I should go to the doctor for some tests as I wasn't having my period she thought maybe I was ill or something. But the blood tests didn't show anything and they thought maybe it was stress or something. Then after about two months the doctor did a pregnancy test and that came back positive. I didn't believe it; I thought "Noooo, I can't be!" I still thought it's gotta be wrong or something. I still didn't believe it, but it was getting more real.

The doctor [GP] was blaming my mum, saying she should have kept an eye on me and stuff. It made me feel really angry. I'm not the best at holding my temper and I told him what I thought, then my mum told me off for telling him. The doctor made an appointment for me to have a scan at the local hospital and that's when they told me I was 21 weeks. I was like, "Whoa!" It was sort of weird 'cos for 21 weeks I hadn't noticed anything. Someone at the hospital told me I might be too late to have

a termination. But I knew straight away what I wanted to do 'cos I've got my GCSEs and stuff and there is NO WAY that I would stop that.

I'm 14, surely it's wrong that they can slag all the teenage mums off in the newspaper about how they can't look after their kids, but maybe they weren't allowed to have the termination. You can't win either way. They are going to label me as this pregnant teenager, you know, underage mum; people are just going look at me and think, oh dirt, you know. So I don't want anyone to know. At 14, basically, you can't look after yourself and then you've got everyone saying "Don't have sex then", but at the end of the day what are you gonna do? It's just experimenting you know, you make mistakes. There's no winning, you know what I mean?

I really wanted my mum here. She's the only one who's actually there. We used to argue all the time, you know, when you get into your teenage years and you just hate your mum and anyone who tells you what to do. She's changed a lot. My dad lives too far away to do anything. He said I've gotta email him every day just to tell him how I'm feeling. He cared and I thought he'd just hate me. My step dad doesn't speak to me though. I begged my mum not to tell him, but I suppose she's seeing him day in, day out - she can't lie to him. I was angry at my mum and angry at him, but I do understand. I suppose if you love someone that much you've got to tell them the truth.

My GCSEs are next May so I'll soon have course work for them. I wanna own my own daycare centre for kids. I know it sounds stupid saying this, but I really love kids.'

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'You can't win either way. They are going to label me as this pregnant teenager.'

conclusions

- this research study makes a unique contribution to the growing political and public debate around the issue of late abortion
- the results of the study support the view that women should continue to have access to abortion up to 24 weeks for the following reasons: pregnancies are not discovered until late; pregnancies become unwanted when circumstances surrounding the pregnancy change; and delays at all stages of the referral process can occur, pushing women into the category of 'late abortion'
- the research has shown that women do not make the decision to terminate later in pregnancy lightly. They consider their options, think carefully and deeply about the decision and are generally supported by others
- women feel that they are acting responsibly by opting for a late abortion, and seek to reduce the impact of unwanted pregnancy not just on their own lives, but on the lives of their partners, existing children and on the unwanted pregnancy itself
- Marie Stopes International believes that lowering the upper gestation limit for termination of pregnancy will not end demand for late abortion, but will merely increase the hardship and emotional suffering of women seeking them. Accurate information on methods of contraception available, side effects, return to fertility and on the signs and symptoms of pregnancy, as well as improving access to abortion are essential elements of any attempt to reduce the proportion of women undergoing abortion between 19 and 24 weeks
- reducing the upper gestational limit for abortion would have a strongly negative impact upon the lives of women who, for a wide number of reasons, choose abortion later in the pregnancy
- this research shows that the decision to choose abortion must lie with the woman. It is the pregnant woman who is in the best position to decide whether to have a termination.