

Professor Lawson's account below is an example of the type of experiences that led to the relaxation of Victoria's abortion law

An impossible plight...

One cold and wet Melbourne night in 1968, I received a call for help from a young female intern who was working in casualty. At that time I was the Medical Director of Footscray Hospital, which provided the emergency services to the western suburbs of Melbourne.

When I arrived at the hospital both the intern and her patient were in tears. The intern explained that the patient wished to have an urgent abortion, but in Melbourne this was impossible. During the previous week, doctors had been arrested and charged for conducting abortions. The patient, an unmarried young woman, indicated that the impossible must be made possible or else she would have to commit suicide.

By this time I was almost also in tears – but male Medical Directors are not allowed to cry. I asked the intern to get us all a cup of tea. While the intern was away, I quietly suggested to the patient that having the baby was not a bad outcome. She insisted that it was simply impossible to have this baby. The tea arrived, the intern left. Finally the story came out.

She was a so-called 'torch' singer who entertained the US soldiers on rest and recreation leave from the Vietnam War. She had been working as a singer in Cairns, during which time she had become pregnant. The problem was that the soldier father was an Afro-American. She said to me: 'White women having black babies in Melbourne is simply not on'.

...in Victoria

Rightly or wrongly, I was sympathetic to her plight and immediately got on the phone and sought advice from an elderly uncle of mine who had practised obstetrics in Melbourne for decades. He confirmed the impossibility of patients having an abortion in Melbourne regardless of the need or price, but he was able to give me the name and phone number of a colleague in Sydney who would help. I passed this information on to the patient.

No, I do not know the outcome. Neither the intern nor I received any messages back from the patient. These days, readers would be more concerned about the sexist and racist implications of this story than the issue of abortion. However, it was experiences like this that led to the gradual relaxation of abortion law in Victoria. I think that is a good thing. **MT**

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