



A Dublin counselling service for women considering abortion claims to be pro-choice and objective — but is asking clients if it is 'fair to kill that baby', finds **Jennifer Hough**

Subverting the right to choose

THE crisis pregnancy counsellor, innocently enough it seems, asks: "What is pregnancy?"

Another question: "What will an abortion do to that baby?" and further, "Is that fair to the baby?"

These are the questions put to pregnant women, usually considering abortion, who seek out advice at the Women's Resource Centre, or the Abbey Counselling Centre, in Dublin's Dorset Street.

I am not pregnant and have never experienced a crisis pregnancy, but I have been invited by the centre to listen objectively to the advice it gives to pregnant women — information it claims is being suppressed to protect abortion protesters.

The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA), among others, calls the group a "rogue agency", in that it works solely to prevent women from having an abortion. However, my "counsellor", Pat, dismisses this as nonsense.

"We are here to help women. We are pro-woman and are the only group in Ireland trying to protect women."

So, in return for a first-hand insight into its counselling service, I have been asked to "tell the truth about abortion."

The interview begins with a general chat to "put you at ease". And then, without warning those questions culminate, depending on your answers, in "Is it fair to kill that baby?"

Pat repeats that he simply wants women to know the truth:

- Abortion, along with arms, is the world's biggest growing industry.
- Women who have an abortion are much more likely to commit suicide.
- Women who have an abortion suffer both physically and emotionally from their abortions.
- Abortion can lead to breast cancer, infertility and many other ill effects.

This is the information of which the service wants women to be aware.

In between these bombshells, Pat will continue to try and make you feel at ease though, with a cup of tea — perhaps some chocolate biscuits while you watch the videos in his bag of tricks. The first is a



The centre tells women abortion can lead to breast cancer, a claim the Irish Cancer Society wholly refutes.

pleasant doctor explaining the medical procedure of abortion. It is an information video, I am told.

The smiling female doctor shows the tools used during abortion and explains what happens during the

"That could be the next Parkie Bomber," he jokes, presumably, once again, to put you at ease.

Once the videos are done, Pat takes out his tiny model baby — just a couple of inches in size. I am given it to hold and told this is what a baby looks like at 10 weeks, fully formed, and I am reminded many abortions occur around this time.

Then come the pictures — before and after abortion. Among them a particularly upsetting one of an aborted baby, found by pro-life campaigners in the dumpster at the back of an abortion clinic.

Literature titled "What you should know before you Choose states: "It tears the baby's body into pieces and sticks it through a tube into a cannister. The knife edge is then used to cut the deeply rooted placenta from the uterine wall."

It is clear the WRC — which claims to be a pro-choice and advertises as such — believes abortion is wrong. So why does it lead women into thinking it is non-discriminatory? Simply in order to convince them not to have an abortion, of course. Pat firmly believes women who consider abortion are in grave danger.

"Is it fair that women are not given all the information?" is his repeated mantra. But is it fair to bombard women who are considering an abortion with pro-life literature, shocking photos and dubious medical details? A spokeswoman for the Irish Cancer Society wholly refutes any link between abortion and breast cancer.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists UK says there are no proven associations between induced abortion and subsequent ectopic pregnancy, or infertility, as the WRC claims.

While the American Psychological Association has said there is no scientific evidence to say women could face mental health problems after they have abortions, in March of this year the British Royal College of Psychiatrists announced a major shift in its position on the psychological impact of abortion and acknowledged, for the first time, that an abortion could damage women's mental health and women should not have an abortion until they are counselled on the possible

The facts

■ **Abortion:** There were almost 194,000 terminations in England and Wales last year, rising to over 200,000 when women coming from Northern Ireland and the Irish republic are included.

■ **Number of women travelling between Ireland and Britain for an abortion:**
2006: 5,042
2005: 5,585
2004: 6,210
There are no figures for numbers travelling to other countries.

■ **Termination deadlines:** Abortion is permitted in Britain up to 24 weeks, more than halfway through a normal pregnancy and the highest legal limit for such terminations in Europe. France and Germany allow abortions only up to the 10th and 12th weeks, respectively.

risk to their mental health. Some might say the WRC's method of counselling is wholly justified. But there is a darker side to it.

Pat firmly believes his teachings: women who approach the IFPA are given no other choice but abortion.

The IFPA works on behalf of British abortion protesters. It claims it says there is no such thing as a safe and legal abortion, and there is no medical condition whereby a woman's life could be saved by an abortion (RCCOG says more than 98% of induced abortions in Britain are undertaken because of risk to the mental or physical health of the woman or her children).

Abortion, he says, was safer when it was illegal because back-street abortions were regulated by word of mouth. He and his crusaders working to protect women are the only group in Ireland who are doing so.

Our session draws to a hazy close when I begin to further question some of the group's claims. I was not invited to ask questions, just to listen, I am reminded. I wonder if the women who go there in the hope of help and support are told that too.