

In light of the renewed controversy over abortion, I offer a re-run of a column I wrote when the issue was first raised here, back in the spring of 1995:

<br><br>

Education brings understanding. I know that. I realize that information can disarm fear. That it can dispel prejudice. Displace ignorance.

<br><br>

But what I don't always realize is that sometimes I don't know that I am in need of being educated.

<br><br>

For example, take the issue of abortion. I thought I knew all I needed to know about that issue, about the pros and cons of "pro-life" and "pro-choice." I'd made up my mind a long time ago, and I knew just where I stood. I wasn't so much "pro-life" as I was "anti-abortion" - except of course, in instance of rape or incest or threat to the health of the mother.

<br><br>

The "pro-choice" view angered, irritated me. I thought it a cop-out. If women claimed the right to control their bodies, how could they maintain that it was an issue only after conception, rather than before?

<br><br>

But what with the murder of two abortion supporters at clinics in the same town where my sister lives, the brouh-ha over the U.S. Surgeon-General's nomination, the on-going battle in the press - as well as the suggestion, by highly-regarded individuals, that maybe my views were uninformed - I reluctantly began to track down some of the literature on the issue - and to read it.

<br><br>

It was quite an eye-opening exercise.

<br><br>

The most valuable thing I learned was that abortion is not a stand-alone issue. It is tied into a much broader set of issues: poverty, health, demography, privacy, economics, education, birth control, women's rights in general.

<br><br>

There is, for example, a significant rate of permanent injury and death among women who, not able for one reason or another to receive a legal, medical abortion, try other means of aborting their pregnancies. These deaths and disfigurements could have been avoided - if abortion were legal.

<br><br>

Abortions are often sought for unwanted pregnancies - which could have been avoided if birth control information and methods had been available. But they weren't.

<br><br>

Bans on abortion punish primarily the poor, the less educated - who do not know where to go, or cannot afford clinics that do perform abortions. The well-to-do will still find means of obtaining abortions, as they always have.

<br><br>

Those who support the "pro-choice" movement do not deny the "right" to control their bodies before conception. Here, though, the issue is a woman's right to be free to make the choice, a woman's right to decide for herself, whether or not to have an abortion. Not to have it decided by a predominantly male legislature. Or a predominantly male judiciary. Or a predominantly

male medical profession.

<br><br>

Despite modern technology, no one - except extremists - can state with any certainty just exactly when an embryo, or a fetus, becomes a person - or enough of a person - to have rights in its own name.

<br><br>

No one - except perhaps extremists - believes that legalizing abortion results in wholesale abortions. Practiced in conjunction with family planning, sex education, the availability of birth control information and methods, abortion rates have historically been shown to decrease, rather than increase.

<br><br>

In fact, most supporters of the "pro-choice" movement - at least those who aren't extremists - will admit that they have qualms about the idea of abortion. But they defend the right of women to have one, if they chose to do so, much as the French philosopher Voltaire, once said: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

<br><br>

Research shows that abortion has been an issue throughout history, and that no one else has found a single, easy, answer either. Banned or not, abortions will continue to be performed. What is needed is to work out a position that can at least be tolerated by both sides.

<br><br>

Unfortunately, however, it is the extremists who have grabbed the headlines, resorting to violence, and reducing the debate to inflammatory over-simplified epithets. Reasoned dialogue has become the exception, rather than the rule. Yet informed, reasoned dialogue is exactly what is needed if solution, - or accommodation - to this very complex issue is ever to be achieved.

<br><br>

Perhaps a paraphrase of Voltaire is in order: "I disapprove of what you do, but I will defend to the death your right to do it."

<br><br>

<I>(This column originally appeared in the March 10, 1995, issue of the <B>Pacific Star</B>)  
</I>