Press and TV coverage of selective abortion

Light the blue touchpaper and stand well clear

The issue of selective abortion exploded into the British media last week, propelled by two exclusive tabloid newspaper stories. A week that started with a professor of gynaecology talking about the abortion of a healthy twin ended with news of a woman expecting octuplets and a sponsorship deal of £1m. Both cases raised as many questions about media ethics as about medical ethics. The difference was that the woman patient employed a publicist to handle her story, while the professor dealt with the media unaided.

For Phillip Bennett it was a week to forget. A professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at London's Queen Charlotte's Hospital, he unwittingly catapulted himself from relative obscurity into the full glare of media limelight by speaking publicly about the abortion of a healthy twin. What appeared to be a genuine attempt to air an important moral dilemma in the press turned into an uncontrollable cascade of publicity. The story first appeared in the *Sunday Express*, where Professor Bennett revealed that his patient, 26 weeks pregnant, was carrying healthy twins. She was in socially straitened circumstances which led her to request a termination of either one, or both pregnancies. "My colleagues and I concluded this week that it would be better to terminate one pregnancy," said Professor Bennet.

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Precisely why Professor Bennett chose to reveal the case to the newspaper was not clear. But the language he used was unusually graphic. "A needle is stuck into the baby to kill it," he said, "risking the death of both babies. The mother then carries the dead baby full term, although it shrivels and mummifies." The article explained that Professor Bennett had never before spoken publicly, was worried about talking, and was reluctant to be photographed. But he had not finished with the gory details: speaking of another case, he said, "I dismember the fetus, pull it apart limb by limb and remove it piece by piece." The article added for good measure that "Mr Bennett believes abortion is morally wrong."

No sooner had the interview appeared than the entire media circus was in full pursuit—not a pretty sight. Journalists wanted reaction, and the antiabortion lobby did not disappoint them. For three days the issue dominated the

Obstetricians accuse media of making a difficult job harder

headlines. Offers of money started coming into the antiabortion organisations, and the hospital immediately declared that it would not be telling the mother, dubbed "Miss B." The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children secured a temporary High Court injunction to stop the abortion. But then came the bombshell news that the abortion had actually taken place several weeks ago. The antiabortion organisations were "flabbergasted." The editor of the *Sunday Express* was "surprised." The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children dropped its action.

The general view was that Professor Bennett had been, at best, naive in his handling of the media. The press officer at Queen Charlotte's admitted as much when he declared: "Professor Bennett did not know this case was going to take off like a rocket. His impression was that the *Sunday Express* article was going to be buried on page 24." If nothing else, the professor's interview succeeded in provoking a fierce, and often impressive, public debate, although some argued loftily that such matters could not properly be debated in the tabloid press. Wednesday's London *Evening Standard* quoted Professor Bennett as saying that he would never end a pregnancy on social grounds. "I wasn't expecting to be front page news," he admitted. "The original story arose as a misunderstanding between myself and a journalist. Once the story had hit the newspapers my principal concern was to protect my patient's confidentiality and therefore, with advice, I chose to say nothing."

Five days on, interest in the story was waning. The national press was now more interested in life on Mars, and by the sixth day, with a major train crash and a horrendous camping disaster to cover, the

media caravan had moved on. Until last weekend, that is, when the *News of the World* published the story of a mother who was insisting on giving birth to all her octuplets.

The abortion bandwagon trundled into motion again. Undeterred by the absence of clear facts about the new case, the pundits once again rushed into print. Publication was duly followed by further offers of financial sponsorship to continue the pregnancy. Whether the £1m promised was to be payable in the event that not all fetuses survived was unclear. Doctors, meanwhile, appeared largely united in their belief that selective abortion was necessary if all eight babies were not to die.

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By now the anti-media backlash was gathering among obstetricians. Angered by the horse trading over the individual cases, frustrated by its undesirable and inevitable skewing of clinical decision making, the profession hit back. Professor Kypros Nicolaides, consultant obstetrician to the woman expecting octuplets, threatened recourse to the Press Complaints Commission. "The likelihood of all babies being born alive is very small, and the media make it even more difficult to treat such a case," he said in an interview with this Tuesday's *Times*.

For Professor Bennett the octuplets must have come as a blessed relief. But if one professor was ending his week a wiser man, another, Jack Scarisbrick, chairman of Life, was described as "cock-a-hoop." The anti-abortion lobby was on the march again.—NIGEL DUNCAN, head of public affairs, BMA