

An Ethical Approach to Abortion

Abortion should be decriminalised. Early abortion should be freely and easily available on request. Late abortion should be freely and easily available at least for those who have a valid justification: significant fetal abnormality, threat to woman's health or a serious social reason, for example child pregnancy or rape. Family planning, including safe, free and open abortion services, is an essential part of a civilized society.

Abortion remains a crime in NSW, South Australia and Queensland. Laws are obsolete and unclear. There has been recent debate on law reform in both Queensland and NSW. Around 100,000 abortions are performed around Australia every year. In practice, early abortion is available on demand.

This survey shows the majority of Australians believe early abortion (61%) should be fully decriminalised. Only 12% believe it should be unlawful.

There are overwhelmingly strong ethical arguments for making early abortion, freely and easily available, paid for by Medicare. It is safest, it allows women the possibility of family planning and it is consistent with the practices occurring in Australia and attitudes of a majority of Australians.

NSW, South Australia and Queensland should repeal their antiquated abortion laws and make abortion available on demand.

This survey also suggests politicians will not lose votes by taking a liberal stand on abortion.

2% of abortions are late, occurring after 24 weeks, usually because of a delay in medical diagnosis. Most Australians are against professional sanctions being imposed on doctors who perform such abortions. Nearly half of Australians believe they should be lawful when performed for a valid reason. And most were against professional sanctions in a wide variety of circumstances.

Ethically, there is little difference between early and late abortion. After 24 weeks the fetus becomes capable of living outside the mother with intensive care and becomes minimally conscious. But neither of these developments has real ethical significance for abortion. We already have one line of huge moral significance: birth. We don't need to add another one during fetal development. More restrictive public attitudes to late abortion are not grounded on good ethical arguments but rather gut responses, current social norms and traditional dominant Christian religious values.

If ethics and law are not to depart too far from current public attitude, we should embrace decriminalisation of late abortion for valid justification. Virtually every woman who chooses to have a late abortion does so for good reason. What is essential is that we remove the legal, professional, social and economic barriers to late abortion for those women who have valid reason to obtain one. It is time to take a more ethical approach to abortion.

Prof Julian Savulescu
University of Oxford
Sir Louis Matheson Distinguished Visiting Professor, Monash University