

Winner of the 2024 AMHS History prize essay
History graduate student: Friederike Voit

“New Act in [the] Abortion Drama”: Shifting Attitudes to Abortion in 1990s New Zealand

In 1988, the *New Zealand Herald* proclaimed that a “new act in [the] abortion drama” had begun.¹ This new act played out over the 1990s. During this decade, the political and polarised debate about abortion in New Zealand gave way to a health-centred approach and a gradually expanding range of perspectives and initiatives. In this essay, I analyse how and why this shift occurred, drawing on newspapers and television broadcasts from across the country to provide insight into mainstream opinions and occurrences. Firstly, I provide historical and historiographical context on the previous several decades of abortion in New Zealand. Secondly, I consider the initial revival of political and polarised debates around abortion in the early 1990s. Thirdly, I outline initial attempts to unify public opinions on abortion and why these failed. Fourthly, I establish that existing lobby groups shifted their focus to health-related aspects of abortion for other reasons during the mid- to late-1990s. Finally, I highlight how this shift opened the door for new individuals and groups in the late 1990s to respond to abortion in increasingly diverse ways.

Much historiographical attention has been devoted to abortion in New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s. Historians have rightly characterised the issue of abortion in this period as politicised and highly polarised. From 1975-77, abortion was examined in the Royal Commission on Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion. The committee’s recommendations were implemented in the 1977 Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Act (CS&A Act) and an amendment to the 1961 Crimes Act which legalised abortion in case of danger to a woman’s life, danger to her mental or physical health, foetal disability, or incest.² This law effectively enabled most women to access abortions. The Act divided public opinion, and efforts to repeal or amend it continued throughout the 1980s. Many early historians of abortion in New Zealand were themselves activists in this period, including Jocelyn Brooks and a group of other pro-choice writers and pro-life activist Marilyn Pryor. Brooks’ account centres pro-choice groups such as the feminist Women’s National Abortion Action Campaign (WONAAC) and the moderate Abortion Law Reform New Zealand (ALRANZ), arguing that these groups worked together effectively but failed to bring about satisfactory law change.³ Pryor focuses on the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) and suggests that the new legislation was a limited success.⁴ Cumulatively, these historians established the important role that lobby groups

¹ Margie Thomson, “Curtain goes up in new act in abortion drama,” *New Zealand Herald*, November 8, 1988, section 2, p.1.

² Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Act, 1977, section 33; Crimes Act, 1961, sections 182-187a.

³ Jocelyn Brooks, et al., *Ill Conceived: Law and Abortion Practice in New Zealand*, Dunedin, 1981, p.8.

⁴ Marilyn Pryor, *The Right to Live: The Abortion Battle of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1986, pp.12-13.

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played in shaping both public opinion and legislation around abortion. Women's experiences of abortion have also been explored in the historiography. Doctor and former ALRANZ President Margaret Sparrow investigates women's abortion stories, highlighting a gradual improvement in the safety and accessibility of abortion services during the 1970s.⁵ More recent work by journalist and pro-choice activist Alison McCulloch and doctor Felicity Goodyear-Smith emphasises that women's experiences were deeply affected by the political and legislative struggles of this period. McCulloch argues that "abortion is not just about abortion," but entwined with a broader struggle for women's rights.⁶ Similarly, Goodyear-Smith demonstrates how legal challenges breached women's privacy and political protests impacted abortion services.⁷ It has thus been established that the issue of abortion was deeply politicised and polarised during the 1970s and 1980s.

The history of abortion in the 1990s has only been considered insofar as it conforms to these same patterns. McCulloch demonstrates how SPUC's mandate passed to the new anti-abortion group Operation Rescue.⁸ This group staged protests at abortion clinics and adopted earlier SPUC tactics of intimidating doctors and addressing patients.⁹ McCulloch also discusses pro-choice groups such as ALRANZ and WONAAC, who carried their campaign for the right to abortion into the 1990s.¹⁰ Goodyear-Smith enriches this discussion by considering how activist groups interacted with Parliament in this decade.¹¹ This approach to abortion in the 1990s has two major limitations. Firstly, the gradual decline of pro-life and pro-choice political activism creates the impression that abortion became a less significant issue in New Zealand in this decade. McCulloch acknowledges that "neither side in the abortion struggle [had] the numbers of active supporters they once did," with WONAAC forced to conclude its official campaign in 1992.¹² Goodyear-Smith states even more explicitly that "there was little desire to rock the boat."¹³ This obscures the fact that abortion remained a significant issue throughout this decade, as indicated by the rising number of abortions and frequent media coverage.¹⁴ Secondly, the focus on political debates around abortion obscures other facets of the issue.

⁵ Margaret Sparrow, *Abortion Then and Now: New Zealand Abortion Stories from 1940 to 1980*, Wellington, 2010, p.283.

⁶ Alison McCulloch, *Fighting to Choose: The Abortion Rights Struggle in New Zealand*, Wellington, 2013, p.278.

⁷ Felicity Goodyear-Smith, *From Crime to Care: The History of Abortion in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Auckland, 2023, pp. 91, 101.

⁸ McCulloch, *Fighting to Choose*, p.242.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.261-3.

¹¹ Felicity Goodyear-Smith, *From Crime to Care*, pp.163-8.

¹² McCulloch, *Fighting to Choose*, pp.263-4.

¹³ Felicity Goodyear-Smith, *From Crime to Care*, p.170.

¹⁴ Abortion Supervisory Committee (ASC), *Report of the Abortion Supervisory Committee*, AJHR, E28, 1988, p.5; ASC, *Report*, AJHR, E28, 2001, p.6. For media concern see "Population growth raises issues for NZ," *Evening Post*, September 21, 1994, p.5; "Inquiry into work of abortion body will spark wide debate," *Press*, January 20, 1996, p.23; "Present abortion practice a sham," *New Zealand Herald*, June 30, 2000, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/ieditorialipresent-abortion-practice-a-sham/MUV2MTTX66NLQHK4R445DRTYZE/>.

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The 1990s saw new international developments, media forms, and medical advances. It is necessary to ask new questions in order to determine how the issue of abortion developed in this changing environment. In this essay, I aim to ask these questions, thereby establishing how perspectives and responses to abortion developed throughout the 1990s.

An attempt to amend the CS&A Act sparked a renewal of political discourse around abortion in the early 1990s. The Act required that abortions be approved by two doctors who were approved as certifying consultants.¹⁵ In 1988-9, several Labour MPs proposed the CS&A (Amendment) Bill, which sought to abolish certifying consultants and allow any doctor to consult on abortions.¹⁶ The Bill sparked a heated debate on abortion within the Labour Party. MPs Elizabeth Tennet and Helen Clark suggested that it would improve access to abortions.¹⁷ A number of their colleagues disagreed, with MP Anne Fraser highlighting that the caucus was largely resistant to abortion law reform.¹⁸ This political debate around the Bill also continued outside of Parliament. Pro-choice and pro-life groups lobbied the government as they had in the 1970s and 1980s. WONAAC spokeswoman Di Cleary criticised the Bill as a “convenient ... political solution.”¹⁹ ALRANZ’s Pat Syme similarly argued that “it does not solve the problem of there not being adequate abortion services.”²⁰ SPUC opposed the Bill for different reasons, with Marilyn Pryor concerned that “more abortions will be done.”²¹ Both sides wanted more extreme political action. WONAAC drafted an alternative Bill that affirmed women’s right to abortion in all circumstances, while SPUC called for a commission of inquiry into how the existing law could be interpreted more restrictively.²² Notably, the media exacerbated this polarisation around the Bill. Interviewers frequently pitted pro-choice and pro-life groups against each other, presenting their perspectives as diametrically opposed.²³ Nuance was also often disregarded. When one pro-choice activist attempted to explain the scientific basis for their perspective, the interviewer intervened to assert that it was purely “a moral argument”.²⁴ This divided environment made it difficult to consolidate support, and no amendments were made to the abortion law.

The renewed polarisation of attitudes on abortion continued despite this lack of legislative change. Throughout the early 1990s, there was a revival of anti-abortion sentiment. The New Zealand branch

¹⁵ Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Act, 1977, section 29.

¹⁶ Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Amendment Bill, 1989, clause 4.

¹⁷ “Network News at Six,” *TV One*, October 5, 1988, 9:34, Chapman Archive, University of Auckland Special Collections, University of Auckland; “Eyewitness News,” *TV One*, October 20, 1989, 4:36.

¹⁸ Thomson, “Curtain goes up.”

¹⁹ “Eyewitness News,” *TV One*, October 20, 1989, 4:36.

²⁰ Thomson, “Curtain goes up.”

²¹ “Eyewitness News,” *TV One*, October 20, 1989, 4:36.

²² Thomson, “Curtain goes up”; “Frontline: Contraception and Abortion in New Zealand,” *TV One*, April 10, 1988, 25:24.

²³ “Frontline,” *TV One*, April 10, 1988, 25:24; “Eyewitness News,” *TV One*, October 30, 1989, 00:30.

²⁴ “Frontline,” *TV One*, April 10, 1988, 25:24.

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of the United States anti-abortion group Operation Rescue was particularly prominent. Although McCulloch asserts that this group was strongly Catholic, its membership consisted of a range of religious affiliations, occupations, and other demographics.²⁵ Operation Rescue protested at abortion clinics across the country. The group trespassed on the property of private clinics, picketing, praying, approaching women to dissuade them from having abortions, and photographing women and their car license plates.²⁶ Public hospitals were more difficult to access but one Operation Rescue leader, Mary O'Neill, successfully entered the abortion ward of a Dunedin hospital disguised as Santa Claus.²⁷ In all cases, the group invited arrest in an attempt to force judges to consider whether their concern for 'unborn life' was a legitimate extenuating circumstance.²⁸ Beyond trespassing, Operation Rescue also initiated a legal campaign against abortion clinics. They argued that several clinics' licenses were invalid because they were issued to institutions rather than individuals.²⁹ Both the trespassing and licensing campaigns were unsuccessful in their legal aims. Judges either upheld trespass convictions or, in O'Neill's case, dismissed the charges on the basis that she believed there was a danger to mothers and children.³⁰ No judges suggested that there was an actual danger. Licensing challenges were disregarded by health authorities in Auckland and Wellington, and caused only temporary delays to abortion services at Dunedin Hospital and Waikato Hospital.³¹ Despite its lack of legal success, Operation Rescue intensified the polarisation around abortion. As one of its leading members promised, "the abortion battle in New Zealand has only just begun."³²

These anti-abortion protests and legal challenges, in turn, elicited a strong response from women who sought abortions in the early 1990s. One woman, who encountered protestors at Parkview Clinic in Wellington, stated that "my initial reaction ... was the strong desire to do grievous bodily harm both to them and their thoroughly inaccurate signs."³³ Another suggested that "they are not making the women who come here come round to their way of thinking. They just make us feel contempt for them."³⁴ Supporters of these women were similarly incensed. Sparrow called the actions of protestors at a Dunedin clinic "despicable," while Federation of Women's Health Councils spokeswoman Cheryl

²⁵ Bernard Moran, "No turning back," *New Zealandia*, 11, March 1990, p.16; "Five anti-abortion protestors convicted," *Evening Post*, April 24, 1990, p.25; McCulloch, *Fighting to Choose*, p.242.

²⁶ Suzanne Chetwin, "Running the gauntlet: emotional war at the abortion clinic," *Evening Post*, August 14, 1990, p. 9.

²⁷ "Anti-abortion protestor's trespass charge dismissed," *Dominion Post*, November 30, 1991, p.8.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Matthew Low, "Activists reject abortion ruling," *Dominion Post*, September 27, 1990, p.3.

³⁰ "Trespass decision 'significant,'" *Dominion Post*, November 30, 1991, p.1.

³¹ Murray Williams, "Abortion licenses at centre of row," *Dominion Sunday Times*, June 16, 1991, p.1; Anamika Vasil, "Hamilton abortion clinic closes," *Dominion Post*, June 18, 1991, p.1.

³² Moran, "No turning back," p.16.

³³ Chetwin, "Running the gauntlet: emotional war at the abortion clinic."

³⁴ *ibid.*

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Hamilton was “incredulous” at the dismissal of charges against Mary O’Neill.³⁵ As such, both pro-choice activists and women themselves became more vocal about the right to abortion. This supports McCulloch’s observation that “the new [Operation Rescue] campaign actually helped revive a waning pro-choice movement.”³⁶ The failed attempt to amend the abortion law thus led New Zealanders’ to express stronger views both for and against the right to abortion during the early 1990s.

Responding to this polarisation, the Abortion Supervisory Committee (ASC) attempted to unify public opinion on abortion. The ASC had been established by the CS&A Act to appoint doctors as certifying consultants and ensure that the law was correctly implemented.³⁷ From 1988-9, its annual reports stated that it was “aware of the schism in attitude: to a significant number the rights of the unborn take precedence, while a similarly significant number sincerely believe that those rights are subservient to women’s rights.”³⁸ As this division became increasingly entrenched, the committee suggested that New Zealanders should find aspects of the abortion issue on which they could agree. In 1992, its annual report highlighted that the “common ground... is that both sides would like to see fewer abortions performed.”³⁹ The committee suggested that both pro-life and pro-choice activists would support the development of a national strategy on contraception and planned pregnancy.⁴⁰ This strategy would include points that appealed to each side, including parents’ role in sex education, the importance of a stable family, and addressing concerns around confidentiality and cultural values.⁴¹ The ASC also promoted this proposed solution publicly. Chairperson Heather White and her successor Dr Christine Forster reiterated that New Zealand should unite around reducing abortion rates and developing a contraception and sex education strategy in news interviews.⁴² In this way, the ASC sought to shift New Zealand’s polarised public discourse around abortion.

These initial attempts to unify attitudes to abortion had little impact. The ASC’s call for change in its 1992 annual report was met with apathy and some hostility in Parliament. Several MPs felt that the committee’s previous recommendations had in fact led to an increase in abortion numbers.⁴³ MP Graeme Lee motioned (albeit unsuccessfully) to replace Heather White with a more conservative chairperson.⁴⁴ More broadly, the ASC failed to influence policy or public opinion because of fundamental issues in how it operated. The committee’s legal mandate was to ensure the smooth

³⁵ Anamika Vasil, “Clinic stays shut despite legal ruling,” *Dominion Post*, June 19, 1991, p.3; “Trespass decision ‘significant.’”

³⁶ McCulloch, *Fighting to Choose*, p.245.

³⁷ Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Act, 1977, section 14.

³⁸ ASC, *Report*, AJHR, E28, 1988, p.2; ASC, *Report*, AJHR, E28, 1989, p.2.

³⁹ ASC, *Report*, AJHR, E28, 1992, p.4.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² e.g. Donna Chisholm, “Abortion lobbyists go for the doctor,” *Sunday Star Times*, April 28, 1996, p.C3.

⁴³ “Abortion restriction defeated by 31 votes,” *Dominion Post*, May 1, 1992, p.2.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

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operation of the abortion law but it could not effect any substantive changes or redirect its own focus, as it advocated, to contraception and sex education. It consisted of three people and did not have the resources to report adequately on abortion-related developments, let alone have a consistent presence in the media. Nor was there a requirement for Parliament to consider its recommendations.

Effectively, the ASC functioned as a buffer between Parliament and abortion lobbyists, with various parties pinning blame on the committee for their own inaction.⁴⁵ This culminated in a parliamentary inquiry into the committee in 1996.⁴⁶ Frustrated at its own inability to shift policy or public opinion, the ASC itself eventually suggested that “no other country has found it necessary to have a statutory committee to supervise the abortion laws ... the necessity for the Committee should be reassessed.”⁴⁷ While Goodyear-Smith correctly highlights that the ASC made efforts to shift policy and public opinion, it is thus more significant that the committee’s calls to find common ground on abortion went unheeded.⁴⁸

In the mid-1990s, discourse around abortion in New Zealand began to shift for two very different reasons. Goodyear-Smith argues that “abortion took less of a front-seat role in politics.”⁴⁹ This overlooks the fact that New Zealand was becoming increasingly concerned about political polarisation around abortion in other countries. Incendiary rhetoric was widespread in the United States, with one pro-life activist encouraging others to murder abortionists during a television interview.⁵⁰ Several abortionists were in fact murdered.⁵¹ The New Zealand media took an intense interest in this escalation of anti-abortion sentiment. The tone of their reporting was often incredulous and always condemnatory. One interviewer asked, “what has [the situation] come to?”⁵² Another article noted that “New Zealand’s anti-abortion campaign is restrained in comparison but ... the intensity of the US situation [fuels concerns about] violent protests.”⁵³ These reactions demonstrate how polarisation and political violence linked to abortion in the United States sparked increased caution in New Zealand. Another significant international development was the case of an Irish girl who had travelled to England for an abortion and whose situation led to an Irish referendum on the issue. This case sparked a heated political debate in Ireland.⁵⁴ The New Zealand media were critical of the rhetoric in this debate, with one correspondent stating that “a nightmare scenario was envisaged of posses of strolling abortionists roaming the land.”⁵⁵ This comment highlights how heated political debates impeded

⁴⁵ “Inquiry into work of abortion body will spark wide debate.”

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ ASC, *Report*, AJHR, E28, 1998, p.9.

⁴⁸ Goodyear-Smith, pp.163-8.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.161.

⁵⁰ “60 Minutes,” *TV2*, October 23, 1994, 29:40.

⁵¹ Claire Guyan, “Life and death issue,” *Sunday Star Times*, September 18, 1994, p.C1.

⁵² “60 Minutes,” *TV2*, October 23, 1994, 18:36.

⁵³ Guyan, “Life and death issue,” p.C.1.

⁵⁴ Neville Stack, “Ireland: where yes may well mean no,” *New Zealand Herald*, May 20, 1992, p.8.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

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realistic and productive responses to abortion in Ireland. Reacting to developments around abortion in the United States and Ireland, the New Zealand media thus foregrounded the dangers inherent in polarised and politicised discussions of abortion.

The second reason for New Zealand's shifting attitudes to abortion in the mid-1990s was new medical developments. These developments created new possibilities and problems that needed to be considered. One early example was the abortion pill RU148, which presented a less invasive alternative to surgical abortions. The pill raised questions in New Zealand, with visiting academic Renate Klein suggesting that "we need to look for a non-aligned [ie. not pro-choice or pro-life] critical perspective. We need to ask: is it going to benefit women?"⁵⁶ Klein's question demonstrates how RU486 began to shift discourse around abortion from entrenched polarised perspectives to new health-related concerns. Developments in antenatal testing and in vitro fertilisation also created new medical and ethical dilemmas. The former made it possible to identify whether a foetus would have certain disabilities, and the latter increased the chance of multiple pregnancies. This resulted in cases like a New Zealand woman who was pregnant with twins, learned that one would inherit a genetic disability, and made the medically risky decision to selectively abort the disabled twin.⁵⁷ An article on the case concluded, "terminating a foetus used to be a black and white issue – but modern science is introducing some interesting shades of grey."⁵⁸ Other medical developments included the use of aborted foetal tissue in research and treatment of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.⁵⁹ This predominantly occurred internationally, but the New Zealand media regularly reported on progress and concerns.⁶⁰ While not all of these developments became major topics of discussion, they cumulatively shifted the focus to health-related aspects of abortion. As such, there was a growing rejection of polarised and politicised discourse around abortion and a need to debate new medical developments in the mid-1990s.

This combination of factors led existing lobby groups to reorient their platforms towards health-related aspects of abortion in the mid- to late-1990s. This is not to say that differences in opinion were resolved or that groups with opposing perspectives began to work together unproblematically. Those who had campaigned for the right to abortion began to focus predominantly on improving the provision of abortion services. In particular, they lobbied for the introduction of RU486 into New Zealand. Speaking on behalf of ALRANZ in 1994, Sparrow argued that the abortion law was "the best we can really have in this political climate" and so it was now necessary to focus on providing

⁵⁶ Cited in Sandra Coney, "RU486 abortion drug raises questions," *Dominion Post*, November 26, 1990, p.11.

⁵⁷ Stacy Gregg, "Unnatural selection," *Sunday Star Times*, August 25, 1996, p.C1.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ "60 Minutes," *TV3*, August 30, 1992, 41:24.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*; "3 National News," *TV3*, April 3, 1992, 14:26.

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abortions “under good medical conditions” by introducing the pill.⁶¹ WONAAC’s spokesperson Di Cleary similarly suggested that RU486 would improve abortion services, noting that “it can be [used] earlier than surgery – women hate the delay in abortion.”⁶² The Family Planning Association (FPA), which also supported women’s rights to abortion, soon advocated for the introduction of the pill as well. FPA representative Sue Bagshaw highlighted that “the women who have used it in France and England [said] that they feel more in control.”⁶³ Through these calls to introduce the abortion pill, proponents of abortion rights had a significant impact on abortion services in New Zealand. Sparrow and four other doctors founded the not-for-profit organisation Istar in 1999, which imported the pill after other pharmaceutical companies proved reluctant.⁶⁴ The pill was approved by the government in 2001.⁶⁵ Following delays to seek legal clarifications around its use, medical abortions accounted for 569 abortions in 2004.⁶⁶

Supporters of abortion rights also sought to improve abortion services by addressing inequalities across different regions of New Zealand. There were longstanding concerns about the lack of certifying consultants on the West Coast, with women having to travel to Christchurch to have their abortions approved.⁶⁷ Other regions like Wanganui also lacked adequate abortion services.⁶⁸ Groups who supported abortion rights began to foreground these issues in the mid- to late- 1990s. In 1996, the FPA suggested that legislative changes were less important than addressing the lack of abortion services in rural areas.⁶⁹ Other groups highlighted that differing regulations throughout the country occasionally disadvantaged women in larger cities. Once again representing ALRANZ, Sparrow pointed to the case of a woman whose abortion after thirteen weeks of pregnancy was not funded in her hometown of Auckland, although it would have been elsewhere in the country.⁷⁰ Sparrow emphasised that “there shouldn’t be this geographical variation women in an unfortunate position are being exploited.”⁷¹ The FPA and ALRANZ’s concerns about regional variation did ultimately improve abortion services in New Zealand, as the issue was addressed in a National Health Strategy in 2000.⁷² This challenges McCulloch’s argument that “much of pro-choice activity [in the 1990s] has focused on defending the status quo,” demonstrating that supporters of abortion rights gradually

⁶¹ Guyan, “Life and death issue,” p.C.1.

⁶² Coney, “RU486 abortion drug raises questions.”

⁶³ “One News,” *TV One*, June 12, 2001, 23:00.

⁶⁴ “History of Istar,” Istar, accessed October 15, 2024, <https://www.istar.org.nz/history>.

⁶⁵ “One News,” *TV One*, August 30, 2001, 23:13.

⁶⁶ ASC, *Report*, AJHR, E28, 2004, p.17.

⁶⁷ Thomson, “Curtain goes up.”

⁶⁸ Estelle Sarney, “GPs abortion approval may cut rate,” *New Zealand Herald*, August 30, 1996, p.A12.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ “One News,” *TV One*, November 10, 2000, 21:57.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 23:50.

⁷² Ministry of Health, *New Zealand Health Strategy*, December 2000, p.21, <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/2011-11/newzealandhealthstrategy.pdf>.

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moved away from political platforms.⁷³ Rather, they focused on improving abortion services through the introduction of medical abortion and greater regional equity in the mid- to late-1990s.

Conversely, individuals and groups who opposed abortion began to focus on other health-related aspects of abortion. One key concern was women's mental health after they had abortions. Operation Rescue member Rima McSweeney believed that abortion is "a life issue, a family issue."⁷⁴

Recognising that abortion was inevitable, however, she founded the organisation Victims of Abortion New Zealand which counselled women with 'post-abortion syndrome' and helped them deal with feelings of grief.⁷⁵ While McCulloch suggests that "Operation Rescue never attracted strong support," a broader view of the organisation's members thus demonstrates that their actions had a significant impact.⁷⁶ Moreover, McSweeney was not alone in her focus on mental health around abortion. The New Zealand branch of the United States organisation Project Rachel, which provided support to Catholic women after abortions, was co-founded by SPUC President Marilyn Pryor.⁷⁷ Much like McSweeney, Project Rachel opposed abortion but believed that the church "must [move] with what's happening in the real world."⁷⁸ It especially sought to help Catholics who had abortions, as they often felt alienated from their church.⁷⁹ Notably, Project Rachel increased in prominence throughout the mid- to late-1990s. It collaborated with members of the Health Department, other Catholic organisations, and a hospital chaplain.⁸⁰ In 1999, the American founder of the organisation Vicki Thorn even visited New Zealand, lecturing on 'post-abortion trauma.'⁸¹ This demonstrates how groups who previously sought to restrict abortion rights increasingly directed their energies towards supporting women after abortions.

The Catholic Church also sought to provide holistic support to struggling pregnant women so that they would not require abortions in the first place. In 1994, the Catholic publication *New Zealandia* suggested that "it's not relevant to talk about murdering babies ... support [is] important in a woman's decision about carrying on a pregnancy."⁸² This approach shaped Catholic abortion-related initiatives over the next years. In 2000, the Catholic Bishop of Auckland Patrick Dunn offered financial support to pregnant women who could not provide for potential children.⁸³ He hoped that this "will allow

⁷³ McCulloch, p.261.

⁷⁴ "Five anti-abortion protestors convicted"; "Abortion trauma prompts founding of victims' group," *Otago Daily Times*, March 15, 1993, p.9.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ McCulloch, p.246.

⁷⁷ "Project Rachel – an answer to post-abortion trauma," *New Zealandia*, 38, August 1992, p.42.

⁷⁸ Kate Mahoney, "Church helps over abortions," *Evening Post*, May 27, 1993, p.10.

⁷⁹ "Project Rachel – an answer to post-abortion trauma,"

⁸⁰ Mahoney, "Church helps over abortions."

⁸¹ Val Aldridge, "The Aftermath of Abortion," *Dominion Post*, September 11, 1999, p.23.

⁸² "Support life," *New Zealandia*, March 1994, p.24.

⁸³ "Bishop offers cash to save babies," *New Zealand Herald*, June 30, 2000,

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/bishop-offers-cash-to-save-babies/TTLICLAO5EP2YP6NJLBHXYJ7NE/>.

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women ... to choose life instead of death.”⁸⁴ This action sparked a rise in donations to the Catholic-oriented Family Life Pregnancy Centre, which was subsequently able to rent an Auckland property and support pregnant women needing accommodation.⁸⁵ The organisation also helped women for up to six months after their babies were born.⁸⁶ While the Auckland Women’s Health Council and the Medical Association expressed concerns that the Bishop’s offer would pressure women into not having abortions, Dunn highlighted that this aid was offered “without any conditions,” including to the small minority of women who did go on to have abortions.⁸⁷ Contrary to McCulloch’s characterisation of Catholics as strongly anti-abortion, the Catholic church thus provided genuine help to women in this situation.⁸⁸ Combined with efforts to aid women who had abortions, this illustrates how traditionally anti-abortion groups began to offer holistic support both before and after abortions. Overall, it is evident that existing supporters and opponents of the right to abortion shifted their focus to different health-related aspects of abortion during the mid- to late-1990s.

New groups also responded to the issue of abortion in increasingly diverse ways in the late 1990s. Earlier political and polarised debates had left little space for nuance. The shift towards health-related discussions opened the door to new ways of understanding and addressing abortion. Most notably, Pasifika in New Zealand began to highlight the remarkably high abortion rates in their communities. A 1997 article highlighted that every Pacific woman had, on average, one abortion in her lifetime.⁸⁹ Pasifika health advocates suggested that this high abortion rate needed to be understood through a culturally specific lens. Samoan abortion counsellor Lea Cowley emphasised that cultural factors varied even between people from different islands, noting that “what you do for Samoans is very different to what you do for Tongans.”⁹⁰ She also drew attention to specific experiences affecting the abortion rate among young Pacific women who were born in New Zealand, including financial difficulties, social pressure to marry before having children, and a lack of education around contraception.⁹¹ These experiences differed from older women who were born in the islands and had abortions because they already had large families to support.⁹² Such nuanced perspectives enabled more targeted responses to abortion in Pasifika communities. Cowley worked for Family Life Pasifika, one of four pilot programmes that addressed abortion in Pacific communities.⁹³ The

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ “Bishop’s cash offer brings in mothers,” *New Zealand Herald*, August 12, 2000, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/bishops-cash-offer-brings-in-mothers/5PSSNEOLL532RVKNCYRTODSFUE/>.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ “Group spurns church offer over abortion,” *New Zealand Herald*, June 30, 2000, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/group-spurns-church-offer-over-abortion/ABQBCBSMULD7DJV53SPKAXCFYE/>; “Bishop’s cash offer brings in mothers.”

⁸⁸ McCulloch, p.242.

⁸⁹ “Island women face cycle of abortion,” *New Zealand Herald*, November 21, 1997, p.A11.

⁹⁰ “In the name of the fathers,” *Metro*, 188, February 1997, p.78.

⁹¹ “Tagata Pasifika,” *TV One*, August 3, 1997, 6:20.

⁹² *ibid.*, 6:48.

⁹³ “Tagata Pasifika,” *TV One*, November 2, 1997, 13:00.

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programme worked with people from four island groups and had separate strategies for younger and older women.⁹⁴ Notably, this initiative represented a wider engagement with abortion in Pacific communities. Other efforts included the Waikato Pacific Island Health Programme and individual advocates such as the Reverend Muamua Sofi Strickson-Pua in Auckland.⁹⁵ The increasingly health-based approach to abortion in New Zealand thus paved the way for diverse responses to the issue within Pacific communities during the late 1990s.

The shift towards a health-based approach also enabled a nuanced response to abortion in Asian communities. Asian women in New Zealand also had high rates of abortion, accounting for 1,572 (10.5%) abortions in 1998.⁹⁶ In the late 1990s, health authorities and news commentators began to highlight cultural reasons underpinning this abortion rate. Commentators drew attention to the one child policy in China and considered how this had normalised abortion among Chinese immigrants in New Zealand.⁹⁷ The cultural preference among some Chinese and Indian immigrants for male children, which occasionally led to sex selective abortions, was also highlighted.⁹⁸ Moreover, abortion counsellors reported culturally specific mental health needs around abortion, with many Asian women not expecting counselling before the procedure.⁹⁹ These increasingly nuanced understandings of abortion in Asian communities enabled a more culturally sensitive response to the issue. The Medical Association, for example, advised doctors on how to identify whether a woman sought an abortion based on the sex of the foetus and how to address such situations.¹⁰⁰ As such, the late 1990s also saw new and culturally specific responses to abortion in Asian communities.

Finally, another new approach to abortion was the recognition of men's perspectives. Historian Joanne Richdale demonstrates that men were involved in issues around abortion in earlier periods and her argument is even more compelling when applied to the late 1990s.¹⁰¹ In this period, there was more public awareness of how some men's resistance to contraception influenced women's decisions to have an abortion.¹⁰² There was also a recognition that men could experience mental distress in the aftermath of abortions, especially if they would have preferred for the woman to continue the

⁹⁴ "Tagata Pasifika," *TV One*, August 3, 1997, 7:56.

⁹⁵ "Tagata Pasifika," *TV One*, November 2, 1997, 14:05; "In the name of the fathers," pp.78-9.

⁹⁶ ASC, *Report*, AJHR, E28, 1999, p.13.

⁹⁷ "60 Minutes," *TV One*, June 13, 1999, 25:47.

⁹⁸ "Warning over foetal sex tests," *New Zealand Herald*, June 30, 2000, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/warning-over-foetal-sex-tests/6CF2HUFQVDFQ36GLYBY6FWB3WY/>.

⁹⁹ "Abortion lobbyists go for the doctor."

¹⁰⁰ "Doctors moving to stamp out gender terminations," *New Zealand Herald*, June 19, 2001, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/doctors-moving-to-stamp-out-gender-terminations/7WXHCPKEMSIGV2VILFBNNT7PPQ/>.

¹⁰¹ Joanne Richdale, "'I don't care what it is going to cost, I am prepared to pay,' Men's voices and abortion in New Zealand, 1919-37," *New Zealand Journal of History*, 46, 1, 2012, p.33.

¹⁰² "Tagata Pasifika," *TV One*, April 21, 1996, 2:51.

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pregnancy.¹⁰³ These insights led some counselling and advocacy groups to begin to expand their services to also include and support men. Family Life Pasifika, for example, emphasised the importance of shifting men’s attitudes and educating entire families on contraception and abortion.¹⁰⁴ Psychotherapist Jennifer Bradshaw, who specialised on trauma after abortions, also highlighted that “men can be just as hurt and damaged by such experiences.”¹⁰⁵ She suggested that men needed to participate in conversations about abortion.¹⁰⁶ Overall, New Zealand’s discussions around abortion began to incorporate men as well as Pacific and Asian communities. The shift to a health-based approach thus opened the door to diverse and nuanced responses to abortion in the late 1990s.

Historians typically suggest that the decline in political activism highlights the decreasing importance of abortion in New Zealand during the 1990s. This essay has argued that this decade instead saw a shift from political and polarised discourse around abortion to a focus on health-related aspects of the issue and a growing range of perspectives and initiatives. In the early 1990s, a debate around amending the CS&A Act did spark a renewed polarisation of the abortion debate in New Zealand. Initial attempts by the ASC to unify public opinion met with little success. In the mid-1990s, increasing awareness of the dangers of polarisation and new medical developments caused a change in discourse around abortion. Supporters and opponents of abortion rights both shifted their platforms to focus on health-related aspects of the issue. This shift also enabled new perspectives to add diversity and nuance to the country’s responses to abortion. Perceptions and responses thus gradually changed, but the issue of abortion remained significant in New Zealand throughout the 1990s.

Word count: 5468

¹⁰³ “Book part of woman’s bid to deal with abortion trauma,” *Otago Daily Times*, September 29, 1997, p.12.

¹⁰⁴ “Tagata Pasifika,” *TV One*, August 3, 1997, 7:00; “Tagata Pasifika,” *TV One*, November 2, 1997, 13:38.

¹⁰⁵ “Book part of woman’s bid to deal with abortion trauma.”

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

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