

Bill Baird - Advocate Of Abortion



BILL BAIRD

One wintry evening this year, I took a commuter train to a suburban town less than ten miles from the New York City limits for my first meeting with a man who arranges illegal abortions — and I talked with four of his applicants, all pregnant, all frightened, all desperate.

The man's name is Bill Baird. He is in his middle thirties and he administers the *Parents Aid Society* in both New York and Massachusetts. The Society disseminates birthcontrol information and nonprescriptive contraceptives in ghetto areas by means of a mobile van; it provides aid and rehabilitation to narcotics addicts, particularly mothers and their children who are born addicted to heroin, and it provides on demand any woman with the names of highly skilled medical specialists in abortion.

More than 3,000 women have had arranged to have abortions through Bill Baird's *Parents Aid Society* by January, 1969. According to Mr. Baird, not one of these women died as a result. How did these 3,000 pregnant women learn of this social agency? Mr. Baird says that 64 per cent of them read about his efforts in articles in newspapers or other media. Counseling groups, social workers, doctors and psychiatrists, teachers, and other professionals accounted for 22 per cent of the referrals, while 10 per cent learned by word of mouth from friends, fellow students or neighbors. The remaining 4 per cent were sent to him by the clergy, social-action groups within churches — particularly among the Unitarians — and synagogues.

According to N.J. Berrill, an internationally known developmental biologist, between one and two million women undergo illegal abortions in the United States each year. At least 4,000 of them die. Thirty years ago, seven out of every 1,000 girls in high school gave birth to illegitimate children. By 1968 the rate had risen to 17 out of every 1,000. In his book, *The Person in the Womb*, Mr. Berrill estimates that another 200,000 adolescents are aborted illegally, or attempt to induce a miscarriage themselves. *The abortion death rate for unmarried women is*

four times as high as for married women.

Baird pointed out that the laws which prohibit most abortions were enacted only in the nineteenth century. When I looked into it, I found that, prior to them, custom and law followed the precept of Aristotle which urged abortion when couples already had children in excess. The ancient Greek philosopher asserted that life did not begin until there was a "quickening" — abortion was to be allowed during the first 40 days for males and 80 days for females (how sex was to be determined is questionable.) The Aristotelian code even seems to have been observed by the Roman Catholic Church until 1869, except for a very brief period in the sixteenth century.

Baird says he personally is opposed to abortion. How is it, then, that he helped these 3,000 women to obtain illegal ones? "Every woman should have the right to make this decision herself," he says. "Every child should have as his birthright to be wanted and loved. Each of these 3,000 women did not want to have her baby. One way or another, she was not going to have it. I've helped judges, professors, writers, TV personalities, and others get abortions.

"Despite what you may have read elsewhere — that as high as 80 per cent of illegal abortions are undergone by married women who have already borne two or more children — my statistics show that a majority, 54 per cent, of the 3,000 were unmarried.

"Of the minority of 46 per cent with children, 56 per cent have two to four children and 32 per cent have more than five, leaving only 12 per cent with one child.

"Color? Eighty-two per cent are white, and of the 18 per cent non-white, a high number are Negro.

"Most of these girls and women had never had an abortion before — a surprising 86 per cent.

"Income? Seventy-nine per cent had family incomes of less than \$10,000 a year.

"Religion? Fifty-seven per cent were Roman Catholic, 28 per cent Protestants, 13 per cent Jews, and 2 per cent all other religions.

"How old were they? Again

a surprise. Of the 3,000 women who came to me in trouble because of unwanted pregnancies, 79 per cent were between the ages of 12 and 30 (3 per cent were under 15); 25 per cent were under 20; 35 per cent between 21 and 25; and 19 per cent between the ages of 26 and 30 years. Relatively few were from 31 to 35 — 14 per cent. Only 5 per cent were between 36 and 40; just 2 per cent between 41 and 45.

"Abortion is largely a problem of adolescents and young women, most of whom are unmarried, who practice birth control inconsistently or not at all. Some 1,620 of the women among the 3,000 were not married. They come from all over, many from states where contraception is illegal, or, as in Massachusetts, where it cannot be taught or prescribed to unmarried women. All the 3,000 believe as I do that intercourse is a question of private morality and not the business of the state or the law. The law does not belong in the bedroom of any woman, married or not. The question of morality is between the man, the woman, and their God."

During the first visit, I met and talked with four of the 3,000 about why they did not want their babies, what they thought an abortion was, how they had got into trouble, their feelings toward their lovers, families and friends. Each of them, though apprehensive, spoke freely and candidly, knowing that though I would tell their stories, I'd use fictitious names and change any details about their occupation, school or college, city or state of residence that might violate privacy. But the facts are as real as their anguish.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

To create or not to create; that was the question in this women's mind; or was the

member of the staff — to a large recreation room which that night was piled high with toys that had been contributed. "Every year I play Santa Claus here," Bill said with a fond smile, "giving toys to ghetto children, but we also have lectures."

I sat in this rec room while the first of the applicants, who had been sitting nervously in the waiting room, was interviewed by Mr. Baird, former clinical director of a pharmaceutical firm, with experience in hospital emergency rooms. When the applicant had given her consent for me to be present at her interview, Baird showed me into his small consulting room which contained a desk, three chairs, an obstetrical cross section of the womb and pelvic area, and an electric heater (it was a very cold night).

I was introduced to a boy and a girl, both 20 years old, juniors at the same Midwestern university. They had driven more than 700 miles from their campus over hazardous roads to seek assistance. They were both leather-jacketed and wore blue jeans. The girl was very pale and her hands gripped the arms of her chair so tightly that her knuckles were white. She seemed about to spring from her chair and bolt for the door.

The youth was hardly more self-possessed, though when we shook hands his grip was manly. "We don't have much money, hardly any," he said to Baird, who quickly explained that there was no charge for the service. "How long since you had your period?" Baird asked the girl, who was plain and wore glasses. When she spoke her voice was inaudible, Bill asked the question again very gently and reassuringly. "Early in October." Why had she waited so long? The boy spoke up. "We had made, well, we thought we had it all set up. I did have some money; so did she. A friend of mine told me about a phone number to call

had opened — she could see a man with his hat pulled down over his face crouched behind the wheel. She climbed in and he shut the door. "He seemed very nervous. He asked if I had the money. I said I had and gave it to him. He gave me back five dollars and told he had forgotten to buy a douche. He drove me to a drugstore and told me to go in and buy it with the five dollars. When I came out he was gone."

Baird was grim. "That's a well-organized racket on many campuses. The man is called a 'contact' man. He has no contacts. He just makes off with the money, knowing the victim doesn't dare tell the police."

He turned to the girl again. "Were you using contraception?" She shook her head. "Only time of the month," the boy said shamefacedly. "We just missed." "What am I going to do?" the girl asked.

"Have you told your parents — or his?" "I couldn't. They wouldn't understand. I don't know what Dad would do. I know he wouldn't let me go back to school. They just wouldn't understand." Baird looked at the boy. "If I told my folks it would just cause trouble. They would break us up." Had they thought of marrying and having the child? "We are going to get married when we finish school and I have a job, but we can't now. Our folks wouldn't help us. Don't think we haven't thought about it."

Had she had a physical examination? "Yes, first a test." Then she went to a doctor off the campus and had another test. She was gazing at the plastic cross section of the uterus and vagina. Bill asked her if she knew how an abortion was done. She shook her head. Bill Baird began to explain in simple terms the mechanics of dilation and curettage, exhibiting and describing the two simple surgical instruments employed,



question. The *Parents Aid Society* will not refer any applicant to an abortionist who shows any desire to bear the child, and each woman is questioned closely on this point.

The *Society* office I visited is a remodeled store on one of the principal streets of a suburban city. There is a reception room, modestly but comfortably furnished, and a volunteer receptionist who is a young Negro mother with three daughters of her own. A short corridor leads past a consulting room and an examining room — a doctor contributes his services and is a

if a girl got in trouble. We called the number. A man's voice said for her to go to one of the entrances of the football stadium and to have \$800 with her in small bills."

"What happened?" Baird asked. His face had clouded. "I, I went there and stood for hours," she whispered. "It was snowing. I was very cold. I wanted to run away, but I knew I, well, I had to do something. I just had to." She told her story very falteringly, with long pauses, as if it took all the energy she possessed.

A car had, finally, driven by, made a U-turn, hesitated in front of the girl. The rear door

the dilator and the curette. "It's a very minor operation. There's no incision, no cutting, a trained specialist gently scrapes the walls of the uterus. It takes twenty minutes, a half-hour. He will give you antibiotics and you go home and rest. If you follow his directions, you can go see a movie that night."

"I'm going to refer you to a doctor who is highly skilled in abortions. If you tell him your circumstances as you've told me, he'll charge you \$50 or \$100, possibly nothing at all.

The girl had begun soundlessly to weep. "There's nothing to be afraid of," Baird was saying as I left.