



FEATURE

A decade later Abortion remains a contentious issue

BY NATALIE MACLELLAN

Diane Smith is 20 years old. She has a pretty good job, a new apartment and lots of friends who think she's just like they are — looking for her place in the world and having a good time doing it. They don't know that when Diane sees a pregnant woman, she wants to run in the other direction.

They don't know that Diane had an abortion last fall.

"It was different, finding out I was pregnant," she said. "And then going back down to the doctor's office and her actually giving me the option of the abortion. It was [an option] I had never thought about — never thought I would have to think about.

"It took me a day to say 'Yeah, I want it' but it took me a whole week to actually figure out that that's what I was going to do. I'd go back and I'd say 'No I can't do this, I can't do this...I'll go home and I'll live with my parents and it'll be fine. I'll go through with it or I'll give it up for adoption'...but my family wasn't [willing] to do that."

So after discussing it with her family, Diane decided to get an abortion.

"I went and I had my ultrasound done to find out how many weeks [along] I was. I couldn't look at the screen. Looking at the screen would have been like 'OK, that's mine. I'm not doing this anymore.'

"[The doctor] was telling me how big it was, and stuff I just didn't want to hear at that time. She was saying how many inches it was — it was 4 inches. I was close to 8 weeks along."

Ten years ago, on Jan. 28, the Supreme Court of Canada made non-therapeutic abortions legal in Canada.

Before that Diane probably wouldn't have been able to get an abortion. It was legal only in a hospital, at the discretion of a

three-doctor committee.

The previous law was deemed unconstitutional as it violated the freedom of conscience and religion and denied women

Abortions are safest when performed between 8 and 16 weeks.

Diane had her abortion at the Queen Elizabeth II (QE II) Health

Sciences Centre in Halifax. There was no lengthy, stressful application process. She made her decision, then made her appointment.

"A Thursday morning, October 24, I remember. My appointment was for ten o'clock, or eight — it was quite early, anyway.

"I went in to an admitting area...there were other women there, other girls, and I was thinking 'What are they here for? Am I the only one going through this today?' And they were all looking around too...and I had to fill out this form and the [nurse] said 'OK, go sit down, they'll call out your name and we'll take you up'.

"We walked down this hall that was not really eerie, but desolate, and lit well. And we came to these

doors that are barred and you don't think anything is behind them; you don't think there's any civilization on the other side. [The nurse] presses in a code and the door opens. All of a sudden [you see] a whole other life, a whole different area of the hospital that you'd never even see [normally]," she said.

"I remember it felt really cold inside. And you could hear suction, but it wasn't really loud"

It's been ten years, and we're still hiding our clinics. How far have we really come?

In 1992, the Toronto Morgentaler Clinic was bombed.

November 1994 saw the first of what are now known as the Remembrance Day shootings when a Vancouver gynaecologist who performed abortions was shot in the leg. The second victim, in 1995, was a Hamilton doctor, and just last year a Winnipeg doctor was shot outside his home on Nov. 11.

In Halifax, abortions are performed at the QE II, the IWK-Grace Health Centre and at the local Morgentaler Clinic.

Many Halifax doctors were unwilling to go on record as performing abortions because they say they fear for their safety. Three years ago, doctors performing abortions in Halifax faced death threats.

Though they are no longer faced with legal issues, women contemplating an abortion still have a lot to think about.

"There's economic concerns; there's social concerns; there's religious concerns. People making choices [about abortion] are bombarded in the media with a whole bunch of mixed

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Top: an eight week embryo, roughly the size of a walnut. Above: protesting the Halifax Morgentaler Clinic in the late eighties.

fundamental justice.

The decision made private abortion clinics — like the Morgentaler Clinic — legal.

Approval by a three-doctor committee was seen as lengthy and overly bureaucratic. Taking an average of two to three weeks for approval, women were often too far along in their pregnancy by the time the committee's decision was made.

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