

LIFTING THE VEIL OF SILENCE: PERSONAL ABORTION NARRATIVES IN NEW ZEALAND, 1919-1937

Joanne Michelle Richdale

PHD ABSTRACT

This thesis examines ordinary New Zealanders' narratives about their abortion experiences and public representations of abortion from 1919 to 1937, using the records of criminal court trials, coroners' inquests, and government department archives, as well as newspaper articles. The first part of the thesis discusses the methods and practical aspects of abortion, and social support for women obtaining abortions, either self-induced or by abortionists. This part of the thesis emphasises how people understood their abortion experiences through the language and narratives they used to describe them. The second part of the thesis investigates the transformation and changed meaning of these narratives in the public domain. By examining how health professionals, legal authorities, and the press interpreted women's abortion experiences, this part of the thesis presents the changing public representations of abortion and its users.

This thesis contributes to the historiography of abortion in New Zealand by redefining the place of abortion in people's lives during the interwar period. Women who described their abortion experiences did not see themselves as desperate. Rather they framed their actions in terms of managing the consequences of their sexuality to fit with their expectations of marriage and family life. This thesis reveals strong gender roles, showing that men played a significant role in the procurement of abortions. For many couples, obtaining an abortion was at once a private and a social practice, involving interactions with family, friends, acquaintances, and professionals. People's abortion experiences became public through various means, including the need for emergency medical care, public complaints, or the investigations of legal authorities. While abortion was an illegal activity, the legal constraints upon the police, criminal courts, and coroners' inquests hindered law enforcement also. These constraints were the subject of complaints by some jury members and members of public organisations in the mid 1930s, while at the same time, press representations of people who used abortion became more negative. These findings suggest there was a gradual hardening of public attitudes towards the practice between 1919 and 1937, prior to the public debates made so vocal by the 1937 McMillan Committee's inquiry into abortion.