Commentary

Reality shows true futility of ‘pro-life’ stance

By Lisa Falkenberg

“Yes. I do want to end abortion,” state Sen. Dan Patrick told a Houston Chronicle reporter Thursday. And with those words, Patrick, the father of the infamous sonogram bill and recently announced GOP candidate for lieutenant governor, confirmed the real motivation behind legislation the Senate considers today to drastically restrict abortion rights in Texas.

Of course, Patrick was quick to follow up, for cover-your-butt purposes in case of future litigation: “This bill is not about that.”

I suppose the bill isn’t about the good senator's political prospects, either.

But Patrick’s comment confirmed something else: the tragic futility of the “pro-life” movement. In reality, almost every single one of us would like to end abortion, or, more accurately, the circumstances and tragedies that lead to abortion.

We’d love to live in a world where every pregnancy is planned, every baby is wanted and healthy and loved enough to thrive in this hard world.

We live in reality, though. And the reality is this: No law, no vote-hungry politician, no movement of well-meaning citizens (and yes, I do believe most of the pro-lifers are well meaning), will ever end abortion.

A pastor who attended the Austin news conference where Patrick made his remarks was quoted saying “abortion began in Texas, and I pray it ends in Texas.” Of course, abortion didn’t begin in Texas. It was legal in some states years before the landmark 1973 Texas case Roe v. Wade legalized abortion nationwide. But as long as there has been sex, there has been unplanned pregnancy. And as long as there has been unplanned pregnancy, there has been abortion.

Our best hope is to keep it safe, legal and rare.

Heading to disaster

Bills like the one Patrick and other GOP leaders are pushing threaten that endeavor to its core. Instead of supporting legislation that could really reduce abortions - by, say, adequately funding family planning services so poor women have access to birth control - so-called pro-lifers pursue an agenda that chips away at rights intended to protect women.

Let me step back. With this column, I’m breaking an important rule never to address the fundamental merits of abortion rights. After all, we had that debate 40 years ago, didn’t we? And the highest court in the land deemed abortion a constitutional right of all U.S. women. But another reason I avoid it is because the debate itself is futile. If you feel strongly about it, you can’t be swayed. This column won’t change your mind.

Most people don’t pick a side based on logic, or even information. They decide based on their gut, their emotions. Some are convinced by testimonials like the kind we’ve heard recently in legislative committee hearings from women who regretted their abortions and experienced trauma afterward. Some are compelled by religion or personal circumstances or by images of vulnerable, though not-yet-viable fetuses.

And many of us who believe in abortion rights are not unmoved by all of this. We are not comfortable with the idea of aborting a 20-week pregnancy, even if the fetus hasn’t yet reached viability. We can count the fingers, same as anyone.

But we also know Republican lawmakers won’t stop with 20 weeks. Next time, it will be 18 weeks. And then 16. And we know that criminalizing abortion, or restricting access to it, won’t alleviate the trauma. It will create more. It may send a desperate woman to the border to buy abortion pills in open-air markets. It won’t save the fetus. It may just cost the mother her own life if she’s desperate enough to turn to the back alley for help.

In 1965, illegal abortion accounted for 17 percent of all “reported” deaths attributed to pregnancy and childbirth that year; the actual percentage was much higher, according to the Guttmacher Institute.
And in the early 1970s, many women had to travel thousands of miles to other states for abortions, risking the women's health and resulting in later-term abortions. After abortion was legalized, women's deaths plummeted and the proportion of abortions done early in the first trimester rose dramatically.

**No gray area**

Over the past couple of weeks, I've read so many emails, fielded so many questions about how I can believe the way I do on this issue. They see the issue in black and white. Life and death. And they can't see the gray.

Here's the gray. As a mother of two beautiful daughters, I have marveled at those sonogram images with tears in my eyes. I have strained to count the fingers and make out the grainy faces. I was so blessed that my girls were both born healthy, blessed that they were planned, blessed that I have a loving, supportive husband to help me raise them, blessed that we have jobs that enable us to care for, feed and clothe them.

Not everyone is so blessed. And for those women, there should be a choice. And it should be hers, her family's, and her God's - not her government's.

The pro-life goal of “ending abortion” is noble, but also naive and dangerous. It won't save babies; it will endanger the health of mothers who will be forced into the shadows to access their right to choose.

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