

## NATIONAL POST

### **No proof an abortion would have saved Savita Halappanavar's life**

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The tragic death of Savita Halappanavar, the Indian woman living in Ireland who miscarried at 17 weeks and then subsequently died herself, has brought with it a storm of protest. People across the globe are clamouring for the relaxation of Ireland's strict abortion laws. "Are you willing to force a woman to endure days of agony, simply because her fetus is technically alive?" asked National Post columnist Chris Selley.

The question is whether pro-lifers who desire strict abortion laws have blood on their hands. For those of us who call ourselves pro-life, responding to this question is both reasonable and necessary.

A young, vibrant woman is dead and the claim is that restrictive anti-abortion laws put her in the grave. Indian newspapers go so far as to accuse Ireland of murdering Savita. The pro-choice movement now has a face – Savita's – to put on their legalization campaign. They claim women in jurisdictions where abortion is largely illegal face increased risks of unnecessary suffering and death. This is not a light charge. But is it true?

According to data from Statistics Canada, maternal mortality for Canadian women was at an all-time high in 1930; 5.8 women died per 1000 live births. By the 1950s, that number had declined to below one. In 1974, we were at 0.1 maternal mortalities per 1000 live births and the number has declined since then.

Pro-choicers have long held that maternal mortality rises without abortion. Yet the record shows that Canadian maternal mortality declined precipitously prior to the legalization of abortion in Canada. Canadian abortion laws began to open up in 1969 and abortion became available on demand without any restriction after the 1988 R. v. Morgentaler decision.

This shows abortion does not save women's lives, but good medical care does. Ireland's own statistics reflect this truth. The United Nation's 2005 report on maternal mortality found Ireland has one of the lowest maternal mortality rates in the world, despite largely banning abortion procedures.

However, neither does Ireland ban abortion outright. Irish law allows for exemptions for the life of the mother.

So what actually happened in Savita's case? Why did she not receive good medical care? Few details are provided, surely stemming in part due to patient confidentiality requirements and in consideration of the lawsuit that will follow. Regardless, speculation and accusations abound.

We do know that Savita was 17 weeks pregnant. Had she had an abortion, it would have been a more complicated one. Abortions get more dangerous as the number of weeks progress. Second trimester abortions may involve the use of forceps to remove dismembered body parts. This is not a faceless mass-precisely because by this point ears, eyes and eyelashes are developing, as are major body systems.

A truly interested person might ask questions around the nature of Savita's sickness, and whether the miscarriage was the prime culprit in her death. We don't know whether she received antibiotics, how much or when. Without the right dosage of antibiotics, an abortion might just as likely have resulted in sepsis and death.

Indeed, women do die from abortions of the legal variety, it's just we don't hear about it in the mainstream media. Take the recent case of Tonya Reaves in a Planned Parenthood clinic in Chicago in July 2012 or Laura Hope Smith who died in Massachusetts in 2007.

Savita's family seems to desire that Ireland adopt laws that reflect India's. Often the newspaper articles will cite Ireland's Catholicism as the reason given for the abortion denied. But a quick read of *Unnatural Selection* by the pro-choice Mara Hvistendahl reveals a callous attitude in India toward life in the womb, particularly where the unborn are female. India is currently grappling with the problem of missing women and the increased rates of human trafficking for those women who aren't. To change Irish law to meet Indian standards might not be an elevation.

If there is only one thing clear in this tragedy, it is that Savita's death is now being used for political goals. Savita's death is tragic, but to claim abortion would have in and of itself changed the outcome is not necessarily true. To place the blame squarely on pro-lifers and pro-life legislation for Savita's death cannot be done with the facts we have – and furthermore denies what we know about good maternal care.

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