



# Fifteen years on, stigma remains – along with secrecy, trauma

FIFTEEN years after abortion was legalised in South Africa, the stigma remains.

Many medical doctors refuse to perform an abortion – among them the head of the PE Hospital Complex's Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at Dora Nginza Hospital, Dr Mfundo Mabenge.

"We have mummies who come for check-ups, and women and girls who want abortions. We do not let the two groups meet," Mabenge says.

"We decided we would rather have

those who want abortions kept somewhere else. We call it the women's clinic. We want to protect them and their rights and we do not want judgment and stigma attaching to them.

"Termination of pregnancy is still frowned upon in our community. Even if you are sexually assaulted and fall pregnant, some believe you do not have the right to terminate."

Although Mabenge himself refuses to do abortions for religious reasons, he and his

fellow doctors will never hesitate to help a woman who is in shock or bleeding from an illegal abortion. "I have to make sure that women do not die."

The clinic's abortion nurse, Sharon Hobo, said many teenagers came to the clinic during school hours in the hope nobody would recognise them. "Most of them want to keep this a secret."

A 17-year-old at the clinic said: "I kept my pregnancy a secret from my aunt for a very long time. I would usually undress in

front of her but I stopped. When I came to the clinic for an abortion I came by myself. I did not tell anybody."

Hobo says teens often come with their friends' identity documents. "I get very angry when I find this out as we need to know what their history is."

A study done by NMMU's Prof Tilla Olivier, in which teachers in Nelson Mandela Bay examined the impact abortion had on teenagers in the classroom, also highlighted a concern the practice was creating a

culture of secrecy and evasiveness.

"We see them on the street the one day and you just know they are pregnant," one Jeffreys Bay teenager told The Herald.

"The next week their baby bump is gone. You ask them about it, but they just say they were never pregnant."

Olivier's study showed teachers felt most teenagers would just "blank out the abortion and get on with their lives" and that they would start to keep secrets and become socially isolated.

Jean Downey, from New Life Crisis Pregnancy Centre in Uitenhage, said the culture of secrecy around abortion created a significant problem for women later on.

"We will never judge anybody who chose to have an abortion. But abortion is devastating – emotionally and spiritually. It makes me sad to think what impact it has on the lives of women and girls."

"The trauma these women go through, especially if they have an abortion later in their pregnancy, is immense."

# A tale of two nurses, two sides

**THANDI PLAATJIE**

**H**ER name means "to love" but Thandi Plaatjie preaches a tough combination of accountability and responsibility. Plaatjie, who works at Jeffreys Bay's busy Healthy Mom and Baby Clinic, is outspoken and vehemently pro-life.

She is well aware she has a tough crowd to work with, and has no illusions about "her teenagers".

"These girls know about sex. They are clued up. There is no problem with access to contraceptives. We do not know how to get through to them. They are not even scared of HIV."

But when they come knocking on the clinic's door with a crisis pregnancy or wracked by guilt following an abortion, she is the first to tell them that "God loves you".

"They have to

ask for forgiveness. It is something they will have to live with the rest of their lives."

Plaatjie often has to be a master of diplomacy in dealing with the families of pregnant girls, but believes the rewards are great. "One of my teenagers named her child after me," she smiles.

"Last year, one of my teenagers told me there was a girl who was pregnant but hiding it. I could not get hold of her. I was scared to visit her because the parents in this town know that if Thandi comes to visit – there is something wrong."

"She finally came to me. She told me her cousin was the father and her father was furious. Her father was an elder in his church. I did not know what to say to him. I just kept on saying, 'you know what God said about abortion'."

"Two to three months later he had cooled down. The family decided to keep the baby."

"The boy ... loves his baby." In another case, she

No matter what your view on abortion, there are people on both sides of the divide who go the extra mile to help those in need. **Estelle Ellis** speaks to two unsung heroes, doing very different types of work in the same field



**LOVING CARE:** Community worker Thandi Plaatjie attends to a woman and her child at the Healthy Mom and Baby Clinic in Jeffreys Bay

took a teenager whose family wanted to force her to drink medicine that would lead to an abortion, to her house for a few weeks until her family situation



**TWELVE WEEKS:** Counsellors use these plastic babies to show children how big a foetus is at 12 weeks

Three teenagers – from Kwazakhele, Humansdorp and Jeffreys Bay – tell **Estelle Ellis** how they dealt with their unplanned pregnancies

## I am 16 and I had an abortion . . .

WHEN I found out I was pregnant I could not tell anybody. I was too scared. I did not think about it. All I wanted was to go to the clinic to have an abortion.

When they did the scan I turned my head away as I did not want to see. I did not think about what was happening. When they told me to wait, I was cramping but I did not allow myself to feel the pain. I just did what I was told. I was feeling ill, and vomited. They told me it would be sore. I could not think of the pain. Even when I left I did not ever want to think about it again.

I am a Christian. I do not believe in taking a life. But I could not give myself a chance to think about that. I just could not be pregnant. I had nobody who would help me. I did not even have anybody I could tell. I would have lost my boyfriend if I told him.

Sometimes I will see a baby on the street and I start to wonder, but I can never think of this again.

Now I look at the girls at school who are pregnant the one day and then not anymore. We look at each other and we know. But we will never say anything. We do not think anymore.

All I wanted was someone to love.

## I was 17 when they turned me away from abortion clinic . . .

WHEN I realised I was pregnant I knew my aunt would be very angry. My parents passed away so she was the one looking after me.

I wanted to kill my boyfriend. I was furious at him. For several days I would walk up to my aunt's house and knock on the door. I wanted to tell her. But before she could answer the door I would run away. I went there so many times.

When she guessed, I had to move in with my boyfriend. She did not want me in the house anymore. I wanted an abortion. It took me a long time to get the R140 to get to the clinic.

When I arrived there I waited for a long time. When they finally did the scan they said it was too late to abort. They could not help me.

I prayed that day thanking God for saving my baby. My baby is my whole life now.

## I am 17 and I had my baby . . .

WHEN I got pregnant and my mother found out, I said I wanted an abortion. She said: "No, he is your mistake and you must raise him."

My boyfriend and I went for an HIV test, but we never used anything. We love each other.

We are still together but it is hard raising a child. I like my sleep. Now my mother throws water on my face to wake me up when the baby is crying.

I have left school. I hope I can find a job. Some days we still laugh, but the baby changed everything.

**THIS series of reports was done in collaboration with the Pulitzer Centre for Crisis Reporting as part of their project into maternal health in Africa: "The Promise of Life: Reproductive Choice in Africa."**

## SAVING MISSION: Abortion nurse Sharon Hobo is committed to helping teenagers find a safe way to end their pregnancies

one who is not fit to look after children. The mother never even visited her when she was in hospital.

"She is doing so well now," Plaatjie beams. "She will be a year in July. She is a little miracle and has been adopted by a loving family."

## SHARON HOB0

As head of Dora Nginza's termination of pregnancy clinic, Sharon Hobo performs 16 to 20 abortions a day. "We tell them we will try by all means not to injure them . . . the procedure takes less than 10 minutes if the client is cooperative. It is painful. They do scream."

Unflinchingly practical and honest, Hobo says she tries to explain all the steps to her patients.

"We tell them what we are doing. I



**SAVING MISSION:** Abortion nurse Sharon Hobo is committed to helping teenagers find a safe way to end their pregnancies



**CLEAN UP:** The bucket used to wash instruments at the Dora Nginza clinic

am used to it now. I still feel for them, I never want to treat my patients like an object."

The busy clinic, squeezed between the psychiatric ward and dispensary, is flanked by a litter-strewn flyover, the windows covered by frayed, sun-bleached curtains. It is old and cramped, but for many teenagers in the Eastern Cape, Hobo is a lifeline.

She says the intention has never been to encourage abortion. "We are not here to encourage termination of pregnancy – but to offer a safe service if people decide to do it."

"We do not want to be here so women can practise unsafe sex. But we do have many who come back more than once, especially the young ones. It's a big problem."



**DISPOSAL:** The buckets where the aborted fetuses are deposited for safe disposal

Pictures: EUGENE COETZEE

"I volunteered to come work here. I have been here for four years. I decided to be on the other side. At first I was not comfortable. It is a taboo to talk about termination of pregnancy, but when I was working at Cuyler Clinic in Uitenhage I saw lots of girls coming in with septic, unsafe abortions," she said.

Sensitive to community stigma, Hobo says she tells her patients she knows people will think they have killed their baby.

"We advise them to tell someone but most of them want to keep it a secret. We tell them we can help anybody, but for support we ask them to talk to someone they trust. Some of the girls who come here were raped and they do not want us to touch them . . ."

When Hobo first came to work at the clinic there were only two nurses working there.

"I thought they needed a new, young face. The teenagers will turn and run away if they see an older person. But if you are young they can grab you, pull you aside and talk," she said.

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WITH abortions taking place every 10 minutes in state facilities, sometimes on children as young as 12, healthcare practitioners hear stories of rape and teens being coerced into sex with promises of airtime. Others simply appear to use abortion as a means of contraception because they do not want to use condoms. For pictures, videos, heart-wrenching first-hand accounts and the stories from the doctors, nurses and community workers at the frontline of crisis pregnancy and abortion in Nelson Mandela Bay, see The Herald's exclusive online investigation at <http://www.peherald.com> tomorrow afternoon.

# Abandoned babies get new start

THE babies at the AAA Safehouse in Westering come through the front door in different ways.

Some are rescued after being thrown away like rubbish, tied up in plastic bags. Some are left in cupboards, in public toilets, or at the hospital.

Others are brought in by crying teenagers, some still clutching the scars from their caesarean sections.

But wherever they came from, Debbie Devoy and her volunteers take them and care for them as if they were their own.

"We find a lot of teenage mummies will abandon their children. I think it is because these children are not conceived in love. They are conceived because of rape, because of drug or alcohol abuse."

"Some of the moms do not have the capacity to take a decision that would be in the best interest of their child," Devoy said. "My motto is that every little body is somebody."

Between 2010 and last year, Eastern Cape children's courts finalised 1 508 adoptions by South African parents, while 60 children were adopted by families outside South Africa. More than 21 000 chil-

dren were placed in foster care and 17 785 were removed from parental homes.

Of these children, 213 were from Nelson Mandela Bay, according to the Health Department's annual report.

The department, however, identified 23 661 as orphaned or vulnerable.

Devoy said not all teenagers abandoned their babies. "Sometimes you get teenagers coming here, showing great strength of character."

"Some bring them here sobbing, just wanting to see where the child is going to. Some are still breastfeeding when they bring their child here."

"We just hold them and let them cry. We had a girl here who was raped by five men and gave her child up for adoption. She brought the baby here herself."

Babies that have been given up for adoption are kept at AAA Safehouse for the 60-day period a mom has, according to law, to change her mind.

In some cases, however, the adoption process gets snagged and Devoy says she had four children with her for more than two years. "Their files got lost. Things went wrong," she said.

According to the Health Systems Trust,

about 30 babies are left in state hospitals in the province each year.

Jean Downey, from Uitenhage's New Life Crisis Pregnancy Centre, said they also asked desperate teenagers to consider giving their children up for adoption.

"When you're in a crisis you don't always realise what you have around you and who can assist you."

She said they would advise teens to consider adoption. "We focus on family and the need for family – if you have a healthy mom, you will have a healthy family and a healthy nation."

## CONTACT DETAILS

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- Alternatives Pregnancy Crisis Centre, Port Elizabeth, (041) 373-3717
- AAA Baby Safe House, Port Elizabeth, (041) 360-0125
- New Life Pregnancy Crisis Centre, Uitenhage, (041) 991-0217
- Dora Nginza Hospital, Port Elizabeth, (041) 406-4111
- Marie Stopes Abortion Clinic, Port Elizabeth, (041) 487-0524