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Catholics doubt study that says no mental health-abortion link

by Simon Caldwell by Catholic News Service

MANCHESTER, England -- Catholic medical professionals have questioned the reliability of a British review concluding that women who have abortions have no increased risk of developing mental health problems.

The British government-funded "Systematic Review of Induced Abortion and Women's Mental Health" found that though an unwanted pregnancy may cause mental health problems, it made no difference to the mother's mental well-being if she continued with the pregnancy or had an abortion.

The review was carried out by the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health at the Royal College of Psychiatry and published by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges in early December.

Dr. Roch Cantwell, a consultant perinatal psychiatrist who led the review, said the work showed "that abortion is not associated with an increase in mental health problems."

"Women who are carrying an unwanted pregnancy should be reassured that current evidence shows they are no more likely to experience mental health problems if they decide to have an abortion than if they decide to give birth," Cantwell said in a Dec. 9 statement.

But David Jones, director of the Anscombe Bioethics Centre, a Catholic institute serving the Church in the United Kingdom and Ireland, said researchers had used evidence selectively.

He also pointed out in a Dec. 12 email to Catholic News Service that the publication of the review came very soon after a meta-analysis of 22 studies published in *The British Journal of Psychiatry* found that abortion increased the risk of a woman developing mental health problems by 81 percent.

He said that in contrast the systematic review "did not conduct any original research" nor present a meta-analysis of other studies but instead "excluded the evidence of most studies and relied on a very small number of studies for its conclusions."

Dr. Pravin Thevathasan, a consultant psychiatrist and member of the Catholic Medical Association, said in a Dec. 11 email to Catholic News Service that even pro-abortion researchers had criticized the systematic review.

"There are still many questions to be asked about the link between abortion and mental health," he said, adding that the findings of the review suggested that the 98 percent of abortions in the United Kingdom carried out to protect the mental health of the mothers may be technically illegal if they did not serve their purpose.

The systematic review included evidence from 44 papers out of 180 published worldwide on the subject of abortion and mental health on the grounds that the reduced sample incorporated the best-quality material.

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It claimed that factors that were associated with increased rates of post-abortion mental health problems included "a woman having a negative attitude toward abortions in general, being under pressure from her partner to have an abortion, or experiencing other stressful life events."

It recommended that future practice and research should focus on supporting all women who have an unwanted pregnancy.

The review was carried out following the publication of recent studies, including one by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, concluding that abortion posed a significant risk to a woman's mental health.

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