



One mum's nightmare won't go away

What was supposed to be a safe abortion, **Melinda Tankard Reist** writes, ended with 200 stitches, a morphine addiction, and a lifetime's misery for the two women involved.

LIKE most mothers, all Leanne wanted was the best for her daughter. What was thought best has now destroyed their lives, resulting in unimaginable physical and psychological suffering.

When 16-year-old Sarah discovered she was 12 weeks pregnant, she told her mother and they talked it through.

Sarah was young. She was not in a stable relationship — the baby's father was a much older man and involved in drugs. And Sarah herself had been taking amphetamines.

A former community welfare worker, Leanne, whose marriage had broken up years before, had a heart condition and was on a disability pension.

"Things were difficult, we didn't have much support," Leanne says. "But in her heart of hearts, if things had been different, I think she would have kept the baby."

Everyone they spoke with advised abortion as the easiest way to deal with the problem.

"They all said abortion was the best option. It was safe and legal. No risks were mentioned."

So they left their home in North Queensland for a clinic in Townsville. But when they got there, Sarah's boyfriend took off with the money they'd put together to pay for the procedure. They returned home and contacted a local youth centre which referred them to Children by Choice, a well-known pro-choice group.

"They arranged the whole thing," recalls Leanne. "They booked us into the Campbell Street Centre [Planned Parenthood, Bowen Hills, Brisbane]. They got us a motel. They said they'd

pay for the termination. We just had to buy air tickets.

"I was so worried by then because Sarah was 17 weeks along now. But the Children by Choice people assured us everything would be fine, that it was safe."

At the Planned Parenthood clinic, Sarah was given Medicare forms to sign.

She then saw the doctor who carried out an ultrasound. The counsellor then summoned Sarah.

Sarah and her mother wanted to see the counsellor together, however were told this was not allowed. According to Leanne, Sarah was then given papers to sign but wasn't sure what they were.

"Because she thought she had to sign, she signed. I would like to have seen them. I could have read them and helped Sarah understand. She was only 16," Leanne says.

Sarah then ran out, agitated and crying. Upset about being put in a brightly lit room facing a large window with no curtains and her legs put up in stirrups she had asked for a blanket to cover herself. According to Leanne, Sarah was told to "grow up and stop being so stupid". Sarah was eventually persuaded to go back in.

What happened next turned into a nightmare from which they have barely emerged.

"I was sitting in the waiting-room. Only five to 10 minutes had passed when I suddenly heard ambulance sirens. I went cold. I saw nurses running around everywhere," Leanne says.

"I asked the counsellor. 'What's wrong? Please



→ check on my daughter'. I could hear the sirens coming closer.

"The counsellor said, 'We're a bit concerned and, to be on the safe side because she's got a small tear in her uterus and is losing a bit of blood, we'll transfer her to the Royal Women's'."

On seeing her daughter, Leanne was shocked.

"When I saw Sarah she was pale, bleeding, moaning, crying, semi-conscious," she says. "She was crying 'my tummy, my tummy'. She was asking, 'Is my baby all right?' She didn't want the baby to be hurt'."

By the time they arrived at the hospital, Sarah was writhing in agony and given morphine. She was rushed to theatre where 11 medical staff, including five surgeons, treated her over the next five hours.

Sarah's perforated uterus had to be removed and repaired — a procedure involving 200 stitches. Her right fallopian tube was completely severed, two feet of small bowel hanging outside her body had to be removed. So did the baby's head and other body parts.

"It was just horrific," Leanne recalls.

"When they showed me photos of my daughter's injuries, to see that, to see my daughter's uterus between her legs, where he'd ripped her fallopian tube, and bubby's head still inside her, and to see from the picture that it was a baby girl. I took a turn and woke up in emergency."

Leanne then sat by her daughter's bedside for 11 days. "I couldn't leave her bed, I couldn't eat," she says.

"We had no idea this could happen. No-one explained the procedure to us. We just thought it would be a safe abortion.

"We thought it was meant to be done over two days because she was so far along. But the doctor seemed to want to get it all over quickly.

"Everyone who came in said 'Oh, no, not another one from there'. I was told they'd seen eight like Sarah so far that year, and have since found out there's been at least three more since her."

They filed charges with the Brisbane police, there was a bedside interview, but nothing happened.

Sarah developed a morphine addiction in hospital and has begun a rehab program.

"The morphine helped her blank out the pain. She didn't want to go off it, she couldn't face what

had happened," Leanne says. "She refuses to see doctors. She's lost her trust. She'd have to be sedated before she'd let a doctor examine her.

"She's got an inch-wide scar from her naval down which will remind her of what happened forever. She may never be able to have another baby. "When I look back now, I think, we could have managed. She could have had that little baby girl and not gone through all this suffering."

Two months later, Leanne reached desperation point. She was having nightmares — the photos of her daughter's injuries replayed in her head every night. "Everywhere I looked I saw baby's heads."

She couldn't get free of the depression that now plagued her.

She saw her daughter suffering every day.

Leanne overdosed on prescription drugs and drove to the local harbour. She wanted to be just conscious enough to be able to plunge the car into the water. She woke to her dog (who she thinks must have snuck into the car unnoticed) licking her face and her mobile phone ringing. There were 16 missed calls from her three worried children.

She decided then to get help and has since had counselling and been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The obstetrician/gynaecologist who was involved in repairing Sarah ("that doctor saved my daughter's life", says Leanne) said he sees almost a woman a fortnight needing treatment after arriving at his hospital from surrounding abortion clinics. He has just performed another hysterectomy on an abortion-injured patient — one of six in recent times. He cannot count how many times he has had to remove retained foetal parts from women.

"It's devastated us," Leanne says. "How many more young women have to suffer at these abortion clinics? We want him to be stopped so he can't do this to anyone else."

— Melinda Tankard Reist is author of *Giving Sorrow Words: Women's Stories of Grief After Abortion* (Duffy & Snellgrove NSW 2000/2002). She also advises Senator Brian Harradine on bioethical and human rights issues.