

BOOK REVIEW

Carol Joffe

Dispatches from the Abortion Wars: The Costs of Fanaticism to Doctors, Patients, and the Rest of Us

Boston: Beacon Press, 2009. xvi + 196 pages. Cloth, \$27.95, ISBN: 978-0-8070-3502-3; paper, \$16, ISBN: 998-0-8070-0128-8.

Anyone who works in the area of abortion has had “that moment.” You know, the one where you are sitting next to someone on an airplane or chatting with a new neighbor and they innocently ask, “So, what do you do for a living?” Carole Joffe’s new book, *Dispatches from the Abortion Wars: The Costs of Fanaticism to Doctors, Patients, and the Rest of Us*, makes it clear why many of us—providers, clinic staff, advocates, lawyers, and researchers alike—hesitate before replying. A war is raging against the provision of abortion services in the United States, and it makes many people fearful of admitting to any involvement with the procedure, particularly as a provider or as a patient. Over the course of eight well-written chapters, Joffe provides an insider’s perspective on how the politicization of abortion has been detrimental to abortion provision and access in the United States, and she also illustrates how the stigma attached to abortion affects those who provide abortions and those who seek them. Some readers may find Joffe’s use of language or her clear admiration of those “in the trenches” to be a bit over the top, but as she clearly states, she is not attempting to present a balanced view of the abortion issue, but rather her opinion about the high cost of the abortion wars from the perspective of someone who has been to the war and has witnessed the carnage.

In the first chapter, “The Stigma of Abortion,” Joffe recounts a series of events that occurred in numerous areas of American life, including politics, law, popular culture, medicine, and religion, between the years 2000 and 2008. According to the author, although individually each of these events has had an impact on the way in which abortion is viewed in our society, collectively these events indicate the extreme stigmatization of abortion in America. I agree. Not surprisingly, as I write this review, events are occurring that may contribute to further stig-

matization of abortion and serve as increased barriers to accessing services. For example, legislation is being proposed that would impose tax penalties on Americans with private insurance plans that include abortion coverage. A physician in Philadelphia has been arrested, accused of performing late-term abortions under atrocious conditions. These types of events are the kinds that Joffe skillfully details and employs to paint a vivid picture of the state of abortion in the United States. In this chapter, she also offers a brief explanation of the theoretical foundation of the stigma, as defined by sociologist Irving Goffman. I think many readers could benefit from a more detailed explanation of how such stigma are manifested and perpetuated individually and socially.

Chapter 2, “You Need a Community with You: Becoming an Abortion Provider,” details the extreme difficulties of training (and retaining) a cadre of abortion providers. The challenges begin in medical school and residency programs and continue as physicians enter private practice or institutional settings such as hospitals. Joffe relates a story of isolation, lack of support from peers, and fear of violence that is altogether too familiar to many abortion providers. She also tells inspiring stories of physicians who work tirelessly to establish and maintain abortion training in their institutions and who find creative ways to ensure that the procedure is available in their communities. In the third chapter, “The Clinics: Ground Zero in the Abortion Wars,” terrorist attacks on freestanding abortion clinics take center stage. Joffe describes violent acts committed against four clinics and also details the abortion providers’ and clinic staffs’ extreme dedication to making sure that women have access to safe, affordable abortion services. Reading this chapter will make you want to commemorate the National Day of Appreciation for Abortion Providers, which occurs annually on March 10th, the date that Dr. David Gunn, a provider, was fatally shot in 1993 in Florida during an anti-abortion protest.

Abortion is a medical procedure, and although in the United States it is usually a safe procedure, regulations

must be in place to safeguard women's health, and informed-consent procedures must be implemented to ensure that a woman knows what to expect before, during, and after the procedure. Unfortunately, straightforward regulation of the procedure and fact-based informed-consent processes are not the norm everywhere in the United States. In chapter 4, "Regulating Abortion," Joffe details the intricate web of regulations and restrictions, often referred to as TRAP laws, that are associated with abortion provision. These regulations include absurd requirements (for example, legislation mandating that a woman be forced to look at an ultrasound image of the fetus prior to having an abortion) and mandatory purveyance of misinformation (for example, that abortion causes breast cancer). In this chapter, Joffe does an excellent job of explaining how abortion regulation influences particular populations such as adolescents and the impact it has on the rights of physicians to make informed choices about what is best for their patients. The author remarks, "When I hear colleagues in the abortion-providing community discuss the TRAP laws, I am astonished that they are able to provide any abortions at all" (page 64). For me, the real take-home message of this chapter is that women are told about all the risks associated with having an abortion (many of which are not true), yet they still want to have one. This tells us something about how important access to abortion is in women's lives.

In chapter 5, "Hospital-Based Abortion: Chaos, Cruelty, and Some Accommodation," the author provides an overview of the difficulty of providing hospital-based abortion services. She illustrates how provision is particularly complicated because many hospitals in the United States are operated by the Catholic Church or affiliated with it, and by the refusal of health-care workers to be involved in abortion services. The beacon of hope in this chapter is the story of Iris, an antichoice nurse who worked in a hospital that provided abortions, and her willingness to ensure that women received abortion services without her having to be directly involved in their care. I imagine that hospital-based abortion providers all over the country would appreciate staff members who are so willing to compromise.

In the sixth chapter, "Abortion Patients and the 'Two Americas' of Reproductive Health," Joffe describes the lack of public funding to enable poor women to obtain abortions and highlights the extreme measures women take to undergo and pay for a pregnancy termination. She also provides a glimpse into the "two Americas" in terms of contraception and abortion, a disparity

that has recently drawn headlines after the Philadelphia-based physician was accused of performing unsafe (often late-term) abortions primarily for poor women of color and immigrant women. The author describes the difficulties many such women face in accessing and paying for both contraception and abortion services. In this chapter, Joffe discusses stigma toward women who have abortions—a topic that has recently received much attention in abortion-research circles. Drawing from research available to her, the author provides a good synopsis of how the stigma attached to abortion colors women's experiences.

What should high-quality abortion care involve? This is a question often discussed at abortion-related meetings and conferences. The penultimate chapter, "Every Woman is Different: What Good Abortion Care Looks Like," tells the story of how most abortion providers work hard to "meet women where they are" and provide the kind of high-quality service that all women deserve, regardless of their socioeconomic status. The author offers several examples of clinics that provide compassionate care and go to great lengths to ensure that a woman receives an abortion only if her request for it is clearly her decision. The stories of extraordinary providers who offer high-quality services and care are uplifting. The reality is that not all women have access to this kind of care. What should be the rule is sometimes the exception. This chapter details important information on what high-quality abortion care should include.

In the final chapter of the book, "What Kind of America Do We Want?" Joffe lays out "the casualties of the abortion wars"—in other words, the problems relevant to American life that have been ignored or distorted because of the constant focus on the abortion issue. She argues that important issues such as adolescent sexuality education and the right to have children have suffered significantly because of the amount of resources used to fight for or against a woman's right to obtain an abortion. Toward the end of the chapter, Joffe lays out her reasons for being cautiously (extremely cautiously) optimistic that one day a truce will be called in the abortion wars. Alas, two years after the completion of her book, the abortion wars rage on, perhaps stronger than ever. The 2010 midterm elections ushered in a new cadre of conservative, antichoice legislators and governors who will surely promote laws intended to restrict abortion at the state level.

This book is essential reading for anyone seeking an in-depth understanding of how the ongoing battle concerning abortion in the United States hurts individuals

and society. If you identify as “one of the troops” in the abortion wars, this book may not provide you with much new information about the costs of antichoice fanaticism. Nevertheless, you should read it as a reminder of why we must continue to fight for women’s right to choose. Joffe’s book should be on the reading list of those who have heard you say time and time again why it is that you provide abortions, work at an abortion clinic, support re-

productive rights, conduct research on abortion, and so forth. Joffe does an exemplary job of articulating why so many people engage in this battle each day. The answer is simple: Women’s lives are worth fighting for.

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