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Abortion Issue Divides Advocates for Disabled

By STEVEN A. HOLMES,

Barbara Faye Waxman would cringe when she heard her co-workers at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Los Angeles discuss prenatal screening and the need to abort a disabled fetus. For Ms. Waxman, who must use a wheelchair and needs a respirator to breathe because of a neuromuscular impairment, such conversations were painful.

"There was a feeling that there were bad babies," said Ms. Waxman, who is editing an anthology on the sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities. "There was a strong eugenics mentality that exhibited disdain, discomfort and ignorance toward disabled babies."

At a time when their political strength is increasing, advocates for the disabled find themselves torn by conflicting emotions over the issue of abortion. Anti-abortion groups, sensing that ambivalence, are courting advocates for the disabled more and more.

Should such a union occur, it could create a force that would have a significant effect on the politics of abortion. What They Have in Common

In June, for instance, the National Right to Life Committee, the nation's largest anti-abortion group, elected Robert Powell, a quadriplegic from Galveston, Tex., as its vice president. Mr. Powell is a co-founder of the Galveston Coalition for Barrier-Free Living, a group that has pressed government and businesses to make buildings accessible to disabled people.

In reaching out to organizations representing the disabled, anti-abortion leaders hope to build on the two groups' common opposition to euthanasia.

"People are saying that the disabled should have a certain quality of life, and short of that we are just a drain on scarce resources," said Lillibeth Navarro, the Southern California organizer for Adapt, a Denver-based group that has strongly pressed for greater rights for individuals with physical impairments. "The thinking that goes into abortion and euthanasia are very much the same," added Ms. Navarro, who also is a member of Feminists for Life, an anti-abortion group.

In the last two years abortion opponents have succeeded in enacting laws in Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Utah and Guam that would severely limit abortions if appeals do not succeed. Likewise, the disabled have been flexing their political muscle, gaining passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act last year. The law bars discrimination against people with disabilities, and will eventually affect virtually every commercial establishment in the country. Trying to Forge an Alliance

"The anti-choice movement gravitating toward the disabled is just an attempt to forge an alliance that will strengthen them," said Kate Michelman, executive director of the National Abortion Rights Action League. "They need to increase their emotional support among people. Any time they can play on the emotions, they feel they can gain some support."

Some who lobby for the rights of the disabled scoff at the idea of a coalition with anti-abortion groups and express skepticism about the commitment of anti-abortion groups toward the plight of the disabled. They say no anti-abortion group lobbied for legislation barring discrimination against people with disabilities or to provide support for the parents of disabled children -- steps they say would reduce the pressure on a pregnant woman to abort a fetus found to be impaired.

"If they truly cared about disability, where were they on the Americans With Disabilities Act or the Fair

Housing Act or the Civil Rights Restoration Act?" asked Pat Wright, head of government affairs for the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, a group based in Berkeley, Calif., that litigates and lobbies on behalf of disabled people. "They were nowhere to be seen, nowhere to be heard."

Still, many advocates for the disabled acknowledge that abortion is a wrenching emotional issue.

Having fought for the civil rights of people with physical and mental disabilities, many leaders of disabled groups say they are uncomfortable limiting the rights of anyone, including those of a woman to end a pregnancy. On the other hand, they have a visceral sense that if that same right to an abortion had been widely available years ago, they or the disabled children they have loved, raised and fought for might never have been born.

"We stress the point that people with disabilities have the same value and the same worth as anyone else," said Sandra Swift Parrino, who heads the National Council on Disabilities. "If that's your premise, then it's difficult to justify using abortion as a means of prevention of disability." But she added, "I strongly believe in women's rights."

Judy Heumann, vice president of the World Institute on Disability, a public policy and research organization based in Oakland, Calif., said she supports a woman's right to choose an abortion, but with some qualifications. "If she chose to become pregnant she should not have the right to a selective abortion based on race or disability or sex or the color of eyes, or anything else we can find out now," Ms. Heumann said.

People who lobby for the disabled are grappling with the issue when advances in prenatal diagnostic techniques reduce the time it takes to detect fetal abnormalities, thus making a woman's decision to end a pregnancy financially and emotionally easier.

Leaders of disabled groups are also aware that, along with rape, incest and danger to the life of the pregnant woman, preventing the birth of a disabled baby remains one of the reasons for an abortion that the public appears most ready to accept. Some Avoid the Subject

Disabled people on both sides of the abortion debate agree that pregnant women who learn that they are carrying a disabled fetus should receive counseling, including information on the range of support services for children with disabilities.

Concerned that the issue could split their movement, some people who lobby for the rights of the disabled have simply avoided the subject of abortion. In recent years at least two organizations, the Spina Bifida Association and the Association for Retarded Citizens, considered adopting a position on abortion but found the issue too divisive.

"We had a task force study the issue and produce a paper, but we couldn't take the next step and take a position," said Paul Marchand, director of governmental affairs for the Association of Retarded Citizens. "And when we didn't take a stand, the collective sigh of relief was incredible."

Still, some groups representing the disabled feel that at some point they will have to take a stand. Lorelee Stewart, a vice president for the National Council on Independent Living, said her group's members would soon be polled to discern their views on the subject.

"We have been waiting for the disability community to be dragged into this debate for a long time," Ms. Stewart said. "It's going to make us have to look at our politics very closely."