

Case #15: Zika Abortions

According to the CDC, the disease popularly known as “Zika” is caused by the Zika virus, which is spread through the bite of infected mosquitoes. After being bitten, people often experience mild flu-like symptoms, and complications are rare. But if a woman is infected during pregnancy, the virus can cause microcephaly, along with a host of other birth defects.¹

Microcephaly is a condition in which a baby’s head is smaller than average, the deformity is often attributed to brain abnormalities. While the effects of microcephaly occur in a spectrum from mild to severe, the condition has been associated with seizures, developmental delays, problems with balance, hearing loss, and vision problems. It was recently discovered that babies with Zika related microcephaly show prenatal brain damage “far worse than past birth defects associated with [non-Zika] microcephaly.”² Brain scans have shown that Zika “eats away at the fetal brain,” and that the empty space in the skull eventually fills with fluid, which has to be drained regularly. Moreover, Zika “shrinks and destroys lobes that control thought, vision, and other basic functions.” According to pediatricians who work with infants with Zika microcephaly, many of their patients “never learn to talk or walk...[and] many will develop epilepsy.”

As the cases of Zika microcephaly climb (4000 between November 2015 and February 2016), the United Nations has urged Brazil to lift restrictive bans on abortions. Currently, Brazil bans all abortions unless the pregnancy results from rape or the life of the mother is in danger. The United Nations (U.N.) High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, has said that “[l]aws and policies that restrict...access to these services [e.g., abortions] must be urgently reviewed in line with human rights obligations in order to ensure the right to health for all in practice.”³

However, Brazil has a large Christian population, and its government is increasingly under the influence of conservative evangelical politicians who see abortion as murder. According to Auxiliary Bishop Leonardo Ulrich Steiner, “[a]bortion leads to eugenics, the practice of selecting perfect people.”⁴ Instead of heeding the U.N.’s advice, Brazilian lawmakers have decided to draft a new law that would increase the penalty for illegal abortion from three years’ imprisonment to four-and-a-half if the reason for the abortion was fetal microcephaly. The abortion provider could face up to 15 years behind bars.⁵

¹ “About Zika Virus Disease,” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, May 30, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/about/index.html>.

² Luciana Magalhaes and Betsy McKay, “Brain Damage in Zika Babies Is Far Worse Than Doctors Expected,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/brain-damage-in-zika-babies-is-far-worse-than-doctors-expected-1461859591>.

³ Alex Zielinski, “UN Demands Zika-Infected Countries Give Women Access To Abortion And Birth Control,” *ThinkProgress*, May 2, 2016, <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2016/02/05/3746661/un-birth-control-zika/>.

⁴ Matt Sandy, “Brazilian Legislators Look to Increase Abortion Penalties in the Wake of Zika Outbreak,” *Time Magazine*, May 28, 2016, <http://time.com/4230975/brazil-abortion-laws-zika-outbreak/>.

⁵ Alex Zielinski, “In Response To Zika, Brazil Moves To Restrict Abortion Even More,” *ThinkProgress*, May 2, 2016, <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2016/02/23/3752371/brazil-tightens-abortion-laws-zika/>.

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