The American Medical Association: Former Defender of Unborn Babies
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At one time, the American Medical Association (AMA) had a strong pro-life position regarding unborn human beings. Using an online AMA archives database, this research note contrasts early AMA pro-life commentary with its eventual pro-choice position. Strong pro-life advocacy in the mid-to-late 1800s, led by doctors such as Horatio Storer, gave way in the 1900s to a waning of pro-life zeal, and eventually developed into a pro-choice stance on abortion.

INTRODUCTION

Founded on May 7, 1847, the American Medical Association (AMA) would grow to be arguably the largest and most influential medical organization in the world. Soon thereafter, in 1858, the AMA founded its Committee on Ethics, and in 1871 its Judicial Council was founded to “deal with ethical and constitutional issues.”¹ During the 1800s, AMA doctors were united against abortion, even though, by the 1840s, “the abortion business was booming,” with an estimated two million abortions per year in the U.S. by the late 1800s.²

The eventual pro-choice position taken by the AMA is essentially a complete reversal of its former pro-life position. This brief commentary explores AMA position changes from its former pro-life position to its pro-choice position of today.

METHODS

The source searched for AMA abortion commentaries was the AMA Archives online.³ In particular, the Transactions of the AMA (renamed House of Delegates Proceedings in 1883) were searched for the following years using the keyword abortion: 1847–1875 (years 1861–1863 not available); 1880–1883; 1885; 1890; 1895; 1900–1910; and then every fifth year from 1915 to 1990, along with a check-up on the AMA position in 2013.

RESULTS

Already in 1857, adoption was encouraged as an alternative to abortion, as noted in the pages of the AMA Transactions:

To remove the temptations to the unnatural crime of abortionism, and prevent the abandonment and cruel murder of unborn and newly-born infants, among the vicious and depraved portion of our population . . . hospitals should be provided by the State, in all our large cities, for the reception of infants, and the concealment of the shame of unhallowed mothers.⁴

One of the strongest, if not the strongest, medical defenders of unborn babies in American medical history was Horatio Storer, MD. In the 1859 Transactions of the American Medical Association, Dr. Storer and his Committee on Criminal Abortion provided a strong commentary against abortion (sometimes referred to as criminal abortion at the time, perhaps to distinguish it—the deliberate killing of unborn babies—from natural miscarriage). The Committee noted that, “The heinous guilt of criminal abortion, however viewed by the community, is everywhere acknowledged by medical men. . . . As a profession we are unanimous in our condemnation of the crime.”⁵

The reader will notice from this passage that medical doctors were united against abortion, regardless of how the community viewed abortion. The article ends with:

[T]he Committee would advise that this body, representing, as it does, the physicians of the land, publicly express its abhorrence of the unnatural and how rapidly increasing crime of abortion; that it avow its true nature, as no simple offence against public morality and decency, no mere misdemeanor, no attempt upon the life of the mother, but the wanton and murderous destruction of her child. . . . [And] Resolved, That while physicians have long been united in condemning the act of producing abortion, at every period of gestation, except as necessary for preserving the life of either mother or child, it has become the duty of this Association, in view of the prevalence and increasing frequency of the crime, publicly to enter an earnest and solemn protest against such unwarrantable destruction of human life.⁶

It will be noted that the doctors make an exception for abortion—without choosing one life or the other, “except as necessary for preserving the life of either the mother or child” (emphasis added). Given their strong language against abortion and in support of the right to life of the unborn baby, it seems clear that in the case of unborn babies, these doctors were referring to what is known today as indirect abortion, where the death of the unborn baby is an unintended consequence of some morally legitimate medical procedure.⁷ Members of this Committee, as noted in the
Research Note: The AMA: Former Defender of Unborn Babies


Dr. Storer published a book in 1860 titled On Criminal Abortion in America. Here, the good doctor states that

[w]e should, as a profession, openly and with one accord appeal to the community in words of earnest warning; setting forth the deplorable consequences of criminal abortion, the actual and independent existence, from the moment of conception, of foetal life. And that the effort should not be one of words merely, we should, as a profession, recommend to the legislative bodies of the land, the revision and subsequent enforcement of all laws, statutory or otherwise, pertaining to this crime,—that the present slaughter of the innocents may to some extent, at least, be made to cease. (emphasis added)

Professor John Quinn notes that Storer converted to Catholicism around 1870. About ten years prior to this conversion, Storer received a letter from Bishop John Fitzpatrick, Catholic Bishop of Boston, regarding abortion. That letter, as quoted in Storer’s book, reads in part:

The doctrine of the Catholic Church, her canons, her pontifical constitutions, her theologians without exception, teach, and constantly have taught, that the destruction of the human foetus in the womb of the mother, at any period from the first instant of conception, is a heinous crime, equal, at least, in guilt to that of murder.

The 1866 AMA Transactions provides a glimpse of doctors’ pro-life views on contraception back then:

We have also seen that not only is abortion wrong, no matter from what quarter we contemplate the act, but so also is the deliberate prevention of pregnancy in the married alike detrimental to the health and to the moral sense.

The 1871 AMA Transactions, among other commentary, draws a comparison between the fight for the right to life of unborn babies and the fight for American independence:

It is not a little surprising that at this late date in the nineteenth century; in these days of boasted civilization, of science, and
literature; in these days of steam navigation, railroad travel, and telegraphic communication—that we must, notwithstanding these and many other advantages, look to days gone by for examples of that which, above all others, should interest us most—a proper appreciation of human life. Why is it that man places so low an estimate on that which God values so highly? Why is it that infanticide is regarded as one of the highest crimes known to the law, and is punished with death; and that foeticide—that the unborn child, having as good a right to life as the former, is daily sacrificed (and with the consent of the mother), by the rude hands of an abortionist, and yet the penalty for the latter crime is limited to a fine and a few years’ imprisonment in the penitentiary. That the views of the public on this subject are not such as they were in former days is clear from the foregoing facts . . . otherwise this wholesale destruction of unborn infants would not be tolerated.

Patrick Henry, a name so well known to the readers of American history, having seen, on the one hand, the broken faith of, and continued encroachment on the rights of the people by, the British government, and, on the other, observing the apathy and lukewarmness of the colonists on hearing of the arrival of British forces on the American soil, in a speech in the Virginia Assembly, uses the following language” ‘Gentlemen cry peace, peace; but, gentlemen, there is no peace, for the British are marching upon us.’

It is true, we have not in the present case a British army to meet. We have no foreign enemy to contend with, but we have a domestic enemy, and that enemy is in our midst; it surrounds us; yes, we have an unprincipled, an insidious, an unmitigated foe to deal with, an enemy to the human family, as dark and as malignant as the spirit that sent it, and it now becomes us to do our part faithfully towards God in this matter, to crush the monster, and to place the profession right before the public. . . . The abortionists are far more destructive to human life that ten British armies; but there are few to raise their voices in behalf of helpless, uncomplaining, unborn children. If our private interests were at stake, how quickly each one of us would seek the intervention of law, and thus assert his rights! But even law has failed to protect helpless innocence, the pulpit has never taken hold of the subject in the proper manner, and it now becomes
the duty of the medical profession, as guardians of the health of the people, to take the matter in hand, and if they stand forward with a determined will and *united front* [emphasis added], they cannot fail to accomplish their object.

. . . *Resolved*, That it becomes the duty of every physician in the United States, of fair standing in his profession, to resort to every honorable and legal means in his power to crush out from among us this pest of society; and, in doing so, he but elevates himself and his profession to that eminence and moral standard for which God has designed it, and which an honorable and high-toned public sentiment must expect at the hands of its members.

D. A. O’Donnell,
W. L. Atlee,
*Committee* \(^{13}\)

From the 1880 AMA *Transactions*, the notion that life begins at a time after conception, at “quickening,” when the mother feels her baby move in the womb, is refuted:

The teachings of the medical profession are, under the more careful physiological studies of the last hundred years, that the old notion of quickening is absurd and false; that *there is no time from the moment of conception to the moment of birth when the foetus is not a human being; and that its life is as sacred at one period as another*. . . . *From conception till the close of a life* rounding its three score years and ten, physiology shows that the same individual exists. (emphasis added)\(^{14}\)

Using the search method described above, the author located only one instance after 1882 (in the 1910 *Proceedings*) where some anti-abortion bills were discussed; one in Kentucky and the other in Ohio.\(^{15}\) Thus, it appears AMA zeal against abortion began to wane around the early 1900s, during a time when Dr. Storer had become weakened by a serious illness he had in the 1870s.\(^{16}\) In 1960 there was an attempt to steer the AMA back onto the road to being more pro-life as it was in the earlier years. That year (1960), the Nebraska Medical Society tried to have a warning about abortion approved by the AMA House of Delegates, citing the practice of abortion in other countries. In response, the AMA reference committee supposedly did not understand the relevance of abortion evils in other countries to American medicine, and recommended rejection of the resolution from the doctors in Nebraska.\(^{17}\) Subsequent commentaries on abortion from the
AMA are disappointing. For example, the following was found in the 1970 AMA Proceedings of the House of Delegates:

In recent months several states have amended their laws to permit abortion for reasons other than therapeutic. Other states can be expected to take similar action. As a result, many physicians find themselves unable to perform a legalized medical procedure without violating the policy of their professional association.

The Board recommends that the House of Delegates establish a policy on abortion that would permit the decision to interrupt a pregnancy to be made by the woman and her physician. However, no physician should be required to perform an abortion and no hospital should be required to admit a patient for abortion.\(^{18}\)

While the last sentence highlights a conscience clause, the remainder of the citation is a retreat from the AMA’s earlier position of defending unborn babies. An example of this retreat is the softening of language where abortion is said to “interrupt a pregnancy.” Continued retreat by the AMA is evident in 1990:

> Resolved, That it is the position of the American Medical Association that the issue of support of or opposition to abortion is a matter for members of the AMA to decide individually, based on personal values or beliefs; and be it further Resolved, That the AMA take no action which may be construed as an attempt to alter or influence the personal views of individual physicians regarding abortion procedures.\(^{19}\)

And in 2013, the AMA continues its non-defense of unborn babies: “The Principles of Medical Ethics of the AMA do not prohibit a physician from performing an abortion in accordance with good medical practice and under circumstances that do not violate the law.”\(^{20}\)

**DISCUSSION**

The AMA went from its position in 1871 that every physician in the United States should join in an effort to “crush out” the abortionist,\(^{21}\) to saying in 2013 that they “do not prohibit a physician from performing an abortion.”\(^{22}\) Thus, the once strong defense of unborn babies by the AMA has essentially disappeared from official AMA positions. In searching with the keyword “abortion” in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) for recent years 2010–2012, this writer did not find any defense of unborn babies as AMA doctors did in years gone by. In its timeline, there are two instances mentioned where the AMA acted to protect chil-
children: 1) an issued statement with fourteen recommendations for reducing infant mortality in 1968, five years before Roe v Wade; and 2) five years after Roe, in 1978, a declaration of support for legislation requiring the use of seat belts for infants and children. Sadly, but not surprisingly, there is no mention made in the timeline about the AMA fighting for the right-to-life of unborn babies between these two instances (1968 and 1978).

Thankfully there are still some pro-life physicians today who manage to fight the good fight, such as Physicians for Life, Association of Pro-Life Physicians, and the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists. This writer would like to see today’s pro-life physicians take up the fight within the pages of mainstream medical journals such as JAMA, one of the most influential medical publications in the world. It would be good to see these and other pro-life doctors put more pressure on their abortionist colleagues, at least in print in AMA and other medical publications, to help end the slaughter of unborn babies. Perhaps the AMA needs a modern-day Horatio Storer, to lead other AMA doctors in defending the right-to-life of unborn babies.

Notes

4. The Transactions of the American Medical Association (American Medical Association, 1857), 102. From AMA Historical Archives.
5. Ibid.
6. The Transactions of the American Medical Association (1859), 75, 77.
8. The Transactions of the American Medical Association (1859), 75, 77.
12. The Transactions of the American Medical Association (1866), 742.
14. The Transactions of the American Medical Association (1880), 469.


