

LIFE OF THE MOTHER

Analyze

Following are a few general principles for responding to the question, “Should abortion be legal if the mother’s life is in danger?” See www.jfaweb.org/life-of-mother for more resources.

- **Common Ground:** Anytime someone’s life is in danger, it is a very heavy thing. Let’s remember as we talk about this that we’re talking about very difficult circumstances people might be dealing with even today.
- **“Life” Versus “Elective” cases:** Whatever we might say about “life of the mother” cases, and however we might come to different conclusions about them, can’t we agree that “life of the mother” cases are distinct from “elective” cases? The most common abortions are purely elective, meaning, there is no medical emergency that’s physically threatening the woman and for which a doctor might be recommending abortion. So, keep in mind that if a pro-life advocate believes abortion should be legal in a particular “life of the mother” case, that does not then mean she supports the vast majority of abortions, which are elective.
- **Two Patients:** Can we agree that there are two patients in these cases where the pregnant woman’s life is in danger? So, if the unborn is a human being, any action we take should seek to care for the lives of both mother and child. If we don’t agree the unborn is a human being, though, then shouldn’t we determine the answer to that question first? If I believe we should avoid abortion if possible, that may not make sense if we don’t agree on what the unborn is.

Indeed, in many of these cases, the parents believe the child is a child and the parents desperately want the child to live, as well as the mother. Williams Obstetrics makes precisely this point:

“...the status of the fetus has been elevated to that of a patient who, in large measure, can be given the same meticulous care that obstetricians provide for pregnant women.” (*Williams Obstetrics, 20th Edition*, F. Cary Cunningham et. al., Appleton & Lange, 1996, p. 78)

- **Which Medical Circumstances?** Let’s say we do agree that the unborn is a human being, and the doctor is caring for two human beings. Then we might ask, “Can you tell me what specific medical circumstances you’re talking about?” Can we agree that when we talk about threats to a woman’s life, we should talk about medical circumstances where her physical life is in danger such that if we do not intervene the pregnant woman will likely die?
- **It’s Hard to Get the Facts.** Keep in mind that it is difficult to know the details of a particular circumstance you hear about in the news. You are not the doctor looking at the patient or the file. You’re an interested citizen looking at a report from a reporter. This makes these conversations even more complicated.
- **Most Pregnancy Complications, Whether Early or Late:** With many pregnancy complications, the best high-risk pregnancy specialists aren’t even recommending abortion. Generally, the doctor is aiming to save both lives and recommends medical management, bedrest, early delivery, or C-section delivery.
- **A Few Rare Pregnancy Complications:** In a few rare cases, a doctor may recommend abortion or another intervention that is the immediate cause of the death of the child or otherwise hastens the death of the child. In all of these cases, we recommend getting a second or third opinion from a pro-life high-risk pregnancy specialist to make sure the intervention is truly necessary. (One doctor, Thomas Murphy Goodwin, lamented in the 1990’s that some doctors recommended abortion because they were unaware of the medical literature which showed abortion was not necessary.) Whether these interventions are right or wrong, and whether any of them should be legal or not, is outside the scope of this article. Please contact your JFA mentor for further discussion.
- **More Resources:** See your JFA mentor or go to www.jfaweb.org/life-of-mother.