

# 'Designer families': A discourse study of fact and accountability<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Relations between event reports, explanations, and the reporter's own credibility and involvement, are studied as discursively handled matters. A series of newspaper reports and commentaries is examined, concerning the controversial abortion of one of a pair of healthy twin foetuses. For two weeks the newspapers reported events, discussed issues, corrected errors, quoted sources, and in various ways handled issues of fact and responsibility concerning those events, including their own reporting of them. The approach taken is to analyse fact and accountability as the business being handled and managed in the texts themselves, rather than issues that the analysis attempts to resolve. This enables a study of how various descriptive and accounting categories are selected and deployed, including the reliability of sources, actors' and informants' intentions and motives, narrative uses of tense, journalistic categories such as the distinction between 'news' and 'features', and a wide variety of specific, rhetorically potent descriptions.

KEYWORDS: Discourse, fact, accountability, news, press, abortion

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## INTRODUCTION

We analyse the construction of a story in a British Sunday newspaper and the controversy that followed it in the national daily newspapers during the subsequent two weeks. This series of texts is the basis for a qualitative study of how reports are constructed and brought off as factual and accountable. The notion of 'accountability' is derived from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967). It means that human activities are produced and recognized as being describable in common sense terms (one can provide an account *of* them), as well as the notion of actions and descriptions being oriented to normativity and responsibility (one can account *for* them). The close relationship between these two senses of 'accountability' is a key feature of the approach taken here (Edwards and Potter 1992). We are interested in how everyday discourse, particularly

factual descriptions and narratives, attend both to the agency of the actors in those events and also, simultaneously, to the speaker/writer's own normative responsibility for getting her facts straight. This is a feature of factual descriptions and narratives of all kinds, from scientific discourse to everyday talk (Edwards 1997; Potter 1996).

In this study we examine how news reports, as an integral feature of how they are written, deal with a variety of reporting concerns such as the status of information sources, interests, and the writer's agency or passivity with regard to information and its factual neutrality. We examine the way that textual categories, such as distinctions between 'news' and 'features', are rhetorically performative, such that their fuzzy nature works as a resource in the textual management of journalistic accountability. This focus on fact, rhetoric and accountability is characteristic of a kind of discourse analysis that derives from conversation analysis, linguistic philosophy, rhetoric, and social studies of science, and which has been developed largely in social psychology (for examples, see: Billig et al. 1988; Edwards 1997; Edwards and Potter 1992; Gilbert and Mulkey 1984; Potter 1996; Potter and Wetherell 1987). In focusing on the categorizing, performative, and rhetorical features of texts and talk, it avoids the use of schematic categories and models such as those used by van Dijk (1993). It is less based in applied linguistics, and the presumed explanatory status of macro social structures, than the 'critical linguistics' and 'critical discourse analysis' of writers such as Fairclough (1995), Kress and Hodge (1979), and Fowler (1991).

Our more general analytic concerns are with the status of information, reportage, fact and accountability, and their various elements, examined as features of news texts themselves. Rather than examining reports' factuality, sources, positions, etc., by comparing media texts to a set of external criteria (derived, for example, from newsroom ethnographies, independent data, notions of political economy and press ownership, interviews, access to original sources, etc.), the approach is to examine how those concerns are managed within newspaper texts. The point of this is not to deny the importance of the world beyond the text. Clearly, if we wanted to discover how these reports were written, what motivated them, what the true facts were, or what their effects on readers were, we would have to do a lot of additional research. However, we are not asking those questions. The aim is to examine the printed texts, the published reports, for how they managed, or dealt with, those kinds of issues. In any case, pursuing those issues beyond the pages of the newspapers would inevitably generate a series of further texts (documents, interviews, etc.) for analysis in just the same way. Similarly, it is not an effort to deny the importance of the extra-textual knowledge that writers and readers must bring to bear in writing and reading texts of any kind. It is instead a matter of focusing on the texts themselves as providing the criteria of relevance for any such knowledge, rather than of introducing it ourselves as a kind of off-stage explanation for what we find.

The materials for this study were selected on the basis that they contain an analytically manageable and fairly discrete set of reports arising out of, and referring to, a single incident. Also, they provide an instance where journalists' concerns for the sources, relevance and accuracy of information were not only embedded in their texts, as always (via citation, quotation, narrative-ethnographic description, appeals to officialdom, insidership, disinterestedness, representativeness, and other rhetorical devices), but came to the fore in an unusually explicit way, as the very topic being reported. The nature of the original report, its content, accuracy, import and consequences, unravelled in an ensuing series of reports over the next two weeks. These unravellings, accountings, back-trackings and explications provided an opportunity to examine something like norms in the breach, when the often by-the-way or disattended nature of sources, factuality, objectivity, etc., were dealt with as a report's overt topic.

What we are calling the 'designer family' story was concerned with the potential or actual abortion of one of two healthy twin foetuses. Reports treated the abortion as an instance of a medical and moral dilemma. But it was also written up as emotive headline news of an actual event about to happen, and again, as an actual event that had already taken place. Much of the coverage dealt with the newspapers' own drama of error, fact, misquotation, misinterpretation, and motive. The 'confusion', over whether or not the abortion had yet occurred, thus became available for a study of journalistic practices, in which the newspapers managed potential accusations of misinforming the public, misrepresenting information sources and, in various ways, getting their facts wrong.

## TELLING STORIES

The 'designer family'<sup>2</sup> story stemmed from an interview with obstetrician Professor Phillip Bennett, reported by *Sunday Express* journalists Caroline Phillips and Greg Hadfield. The full text of the article is reproduced as an appendix. It addressed the kinds of dilemma that medical practitioners face (see also Karpf 1988), exemplified by a story of the request for an abortion by an unidentified but actual 'Miss B'. The difficult decision for Bennett, as posed by the article, was whether or not to perform a 'selective termination', at the woman's request, on one of the two 'healthy twins' (*Sunday Express* 4 August 1996 p. 12). The report, announced in dramatic front page headlines, appeared in full on pages 12 and 13 of the newspaper, under the headings of both 'News' and 'Focus', the latter being a regular slot in the *Sunday Express* (now the *Express on Sunday*) for in-depth reports covering a range of social issues such as, for example, casino gambling, battery farming, an air force widows' investigation, or royal family spending. The 'Focus' story under analysis here was written in present tense and narrative style, with an emphasis on the obstetrician, his decision to carry out a selective abortion on a healthy foetus,

and his more general descriptions of abortion techniques (such as his prediction of the age at which a foetus may begin to feel pain).

Mr Bennett's 'dilemma' (*Sunday Express* 4 August 1996 p. 12), and background information on abortion practice, were the substance of the report, with 'Miss B' a secondary character in the tale, appearing only in the opening paragraphs (Extract 1), and serving as a poignant example of a general moral issue.

**Extract 1** (*Sunday Express* 4 August 1996 p. 12)

- 1 Professor Phillip Bennett faces a dilemma. His patient, 16 weeks
- 2 pregnant, is carrying healthy twins and cannot abide the prospect
- 3 of having two children. She says she couldn't cope.
- 4 She has told Mr Bennett, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology
- 5 at London's Queen Charlotte's Hospital, that if she were carrying
- 6 just one baby, she would continue her pregnancy.
- 7 His patient, Miss B, is a 28-year-old single parent in
- 8 socially straitened circumstances. She has one child already.
- 9 So should Mr Bennett terminate this naturally conceived
- 10 pregnancy? Or abort one of the twins? And if so, which one?

The opening lines of the report cast it in narrative form as a storied, and actual, present tense 'dilemma' for Professor Bennett. It is important to note that these are all *textual options*, rather than necessary reflections of events themselves. The 'issue', if that is indeed the point of the story, *could* have been raised in terms of general principles and hypothetical cases (though less interestingly for readers), rather than as a specific event narrative. And the dilemma's initial location with Bennett rather than, say, with the hospital, or with Miss B, or with society at large, retains an engaging narrative personalization while also making of it an issue of general medical ethics. Alternative possibilities would include its casting as a technical matter for expert medical opinion, or else as a one-off personal choice for Miss B. Bennett's position, as medicine personified, is nevertheless that of an authoritative representative of it; he is relevantly identified as 'professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at London's Queen Charlotte's Hospital' (lines 4–5). In contrast, Miss B's responsibility is downplayed, both by the absence of any reported dilemma on *her* part over a decision already made, and by reference to that choice being externally constrained in any case, by her multiple 'straitened circumstances' (lines 7–8).

The text then invites its readers to share Bennett's dilemma, and form a judgment on it (lines 9–10). The issue is thus packaged not only as a dilemma of medical ethics facing surgeons such as Bennett and the profession he represents, but as a social concern on which readers might relevantly have a view. As with conundrums and other such puzzles, the 'moral dilemma' angle is not logically reliant on the immediacy or even the detailed factuality of specific, actual events, but on their general and widespread relevance. Such a dilemma might be posed hypothetically, for example. The way it is posed in Extract 1 is therefore

a matter of journalistic practice, which in this case is the location of a general moral-social issue, for newspapers and their readers, cast as a narrative instance, involving specific individuals, actual events, and actual choices.

Despite being worked up as an item of general interest, a moral conundrum, the story was flagged in front page headlines accompanied by a large picture of Professor Bennett, posed in surgical gear in an operating theatre. It was also signalled inside the paper, in page headers, both as a 'news' and as a 'Focus' report, and was the subject of a separate critical editorial comment, where it was treated as a news announcement of an actual, forthcoming and controversial abortion. The ambiguity concerning the status of the report (as a news announcement of specific events, versus a topical discussion), and relatedly, whether the abortion had already taken place or not,<sup>3</sup> was important to how the story was subsequently treated. It developed from an issue of medical ethics, into escalating and desperate bids to 'save the twin' (as, for example, in the daily papers the *Mail*, *Star*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, and *Independent*; all dated 6 August 1996). Then followed emotive headlines in papers such as the *Express* and *Star* on 7 August, declaring that it was 'too late'.

News that the abortion had *already* taken place prior to the interview, then became an issue for journalistic accountability, for the interviewee and the hospital, for the two reporters, and for the newspaper responsible for breaking the story. The notion that the report was intended as a 'feature' became a resource in deflecting the accusation of misinformation, and in accounting for how a report of a past event got written in present tense, implying a decision concerning an event still in the offing. The account offered was that present tense is characteristic of the writing style that typifies 'features' (Extract 5 below).

### 'A JOURNALISTIC DEVICE'

On Wednesday 7 August, three days after the first report, several daily papers announced that the abortion had already taken place. The 'designer family' story had attracted a large amount of media attention (Table 1 summarizes the day-to-day stories), covering money offers from anti-abortion campaigners, both in Britain and abroad; responses from politicians from various political parties; statements from the Birth Control Trust and the British Medical Association (BMA); and the announcement that campaigners had won a High Court injunction to stop the abortion. The newspapers covering the story, particularly the first paper to break the news, became accountable for the widespread public misunderstanding arising from their initial reports, and various stories that day addressed the reasons why it had not been clear that the abortion had already taken place.

The *Daily Mirror* (7 August p. 4), for example, placed responsibility squarely with the *Sunday Express*, which was the first paper to cover the story: '[t]he story was front page news, but the paper made a mistake – saying the abortion was to

**Table 1:** Timetable of reports

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<b>August 1996</b>	
Sunday 4th	The original article appears in the <i>Sunday Express</i> as a 'Focus' feature, and in editorial comment, and as front page news headlined 'Abortion of the healthy twin' 'She said she didn't want twins, would I get rid of one? I said yes. I know I'm playing God.' The pregnant woman is described as in 'socially straitened circumstances'.
Monday 5th	The story is covered by the national daily papers with statements from pro-life groups and the British Medical Association.
Tuesday 6th	Front page news reports money offered to Miss B to cancel the abortion: <i>Independent</i> – £10,000; <i>Express</i> – £10,000; <i>Telegraph</i> – £26,000; <i>Guardian</i> – £25,000; <i>Times</i> – £2700; <i>Mail</i> – £25,000; <i>Sun</i> – £1000; <i>Mirror</i> – £1000; <i>Star</i> – cash (amounting to £3000).
Wednesday 7th	Front page news is that the abortion had already happened, prior to a high court injunction to stop it. Summarizing events so far as a 'timetable of a fiasco', the <i>Express's</i> major rival the <i>Mail</i> quotes offers to Miss B at £50,000.
Thursday 8th	The broadsheet papers ( <i>Independent</i> , <i>Guardian</i> , <i>Times</i> ) claim that Bennett is to face an inquiry. An <i>Express</i> article appears on Bennett as a divorcee. The <i>Star</i> describes him as a compassionate man. A <i>Mail</i> editorial 'comment' stresses the need for 'reasoned debate'.
Friday 9th	Reports appear in the <i>Mail</i> and <i>Times</i> of a row between the hospital and the <i>Express</i> . A hospital spokesperson claims that the reporter (Phillips) knew the abortion had already happened.
Sunday 11th	A <i>Sunday Express</i> 'Focus' article by Phillips appears, re-focusing on 'issues', calling whether or not the abortion had happened a 'red herring'.
Thursday 15th	<i>Express</i> front page headlines announce "Truth about aborted twin" with news that Miss B is not impoverished, but 'a middle class professional with a company director husband'.
Friday 16th	Further coverage appears on Miss B's identity, and abortion policy statements by politicians. Various anti-abortion quotes from 'pro-life' politician Ann Winterton are prominent. Another Conservative politician, Elizabeth Peacock, states that the Abortion Act is not meant to allow 'designer families'. The <i>Sun</i> glosses the whole story as medics being allowed to tell 'porkies' (lies) while newspapers are not allowed to 'print the truth'.

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be done this week'. Note that the *Mirror* glosses the status of Phillips and Hadfield's report as 'front page news'. The accusation that one of its rivals got its front page 'splash' wrong would be more damning than citing a factual error in a feature article, where the abortion's specific timing was less relevant to the 'issue', than to its status as 'news'. In contrast, the *Sunday Express's* daily equivalent cited the obstetrician as revealing the news 'exclusively' to it, and in focusing on him, implicated Bennett himself as blameworthy (Extract 2).

**Extract 2** (*Daily Express* 7 August 1996 pp. 1 and 6)

- 1 The doctor at the centre of the row, Prof Phillip Bennett,
  - 2 exclusively admitted to the Daily Express last night:
  - 3 "It was done some time ago . . ."
- ( . . . )

- 4 “ . . . I am prepared to say in addition that this confusion that  
 5 has arisen is a result of a misunderstanding between myself  
 6 and the journalist.”

Note how Extract 2's descriptive details work, in the rhetorical management of fact and blame. Professor Bennett was now 'the doctor at the centre of the row' (line 1), a rather more humble and vulnerable characterization than his authority-wielding formal title in Extract 1. And it was specifically he who was positioned 'at the centre of the row' rather than, say, the *Express* itself, its news editor, or its two feature journalists, let alone the hospital or Miss B. And Bennett's statement was something he 'admitted' (line 2), rather than, say, a reiteration, clarification, further piece of information, or whatever, where 'admission' is the kind of speech act generally associated with an acceptance of guilt or error. The *Express*'s own position was not one of making admissions, however, but remained that of offering yet more fresh and unique news from the front ('exclusively . . . last night'). That is to imply, of course, that having received the admission 'last night', the *Express* was not accountably in possession of it any earlier.

The further quotation from Bennett (lines 4–6), was delicately couched not simply as something he said, but as what he was somewhat circumspectly 'prepared to say', and its content was that the error took the form of a 'confusion' resulting from a 'misunderstanding'. It is a formulation (provided as a direct quotation from Bennett) that nicely avoids the specific detail of what had originally been said, dissolving responsibility into the interactional space between interviewer and interviewee, effectively accounting for the mistake in a way that removes intentionality, and blames none of the parties to it.

The other party to that interview was *Sunday Express* journalist Caroline Phillips. On the same day as the *Daily Express*'s report appeared, quoting Bennett (Extract 2), *The Times* quoted what Caroline Phillips told two of its reporters about the original interview.

**Extract 3** (*The Times* 7 August 1996 p. 5)

- 1 “We talked about a whole range of issues, such as when a foetus  
 2 can feel pain, the ethics of carrying out abortions at 40 weeks and  
 3 the abortion pill,” she said. “The story came out when I asked  
 4 him what was the most difficult dilemma he had ever faced.”  
 5 The professor had been consulted about the final story before  
 6 publication. [End of article]

The quoted journalist (Phillips) sets the story in a context which defines her interest in it, and her intentions in obtaining it. It was a wide ranging, general discussion of abortion issues (lines 1–3), within which 'the story came out'. The latter is a delightful formulation of disinterested serendipity, defusing any notion that this might have been a story pursued by the journalist herself, or artfully obtained, or textually worked up by her in the interests of good (sensational, even) copy. What came out was ready made, a 'story' (rather than some

materials that had to be worked up into one) and what it did was it ‘came out’ (rather than having to be assembled, interpreted, or whatever). Further, what specifically prompted it was not the pursuit of that story in particular, but an open-ended question (line 4), reminiscent of how everyday folk narratives are collected in sociolinguistic research (Labov and Waletzky 1967). Lines 5–6 are not in quotation marks, but provide the *Times’s* gloss on the journalist’s claim that the newspaper report had, in any case, been vetted by Bennett (in some unspecified way) prior to publication. The upshot is a depiction of the reporter, Phillips, as disinterestedly *discovering* a ready-made story, requiring no artful assembly or slant, yet recognizably newsworthy, and passing it on to her readers, having checked its accuracy with its source. It is a narrative of ‘discovery’ and verification reminiscent of scientific discourse (Woolgar 1980). However artless the abortion story itself may (or may not) have been, the account of how it was found and relayed was rhetorically exquisite.

In a subsequent ‘Focus’ article in the *Sunday Express*, Phillips provided her own account of having checked the story with Bennett prior to publication (Extract 4), stating that the doctor read and approved (or at least did not object to) the actual copy.

**Extract 4** (*Sunday Express* 11 August 1996 p. 13)

- 1 Bennett read my copy prior to publication because of my
- 2 connection with Queen Charlotte’s Hospital – I had my baby
- 3 there and was, until I resigned last week, on the advisory
- 4 committee of their Birthday Ball appeal. He did not disagree
- 5 with the quotes or tone of the article.

The account for Bennett’s having ‘read my copy prior to publication’ is at first sight rather puzzling. The reason given was not that Phillips, as a good journalist, might check a story and quotations against sources (whether or not good journalists actually do that is another matter), but rather, that she had a personal connection with the hospital (lines 1–4). Why should that be a factor? The account starts to make sense if we unravel its implications with regard to a play-off between fact and interest (Edwards and Potter 1992). There appear to be two accounts at work here, and they are potentially opposed to each other, unless delicately managed. One is an account of a disinterested and careful journalist who checks her facts (lines 1, and 4–5). The other account is that of an interested party, a hospital friend and insider, who thereby had an inside track to the story’s discovery (a useful claim in any kind of ethnographic work), and in any event would not be disposed to harm its reputation. What we have here is a case of ‘stake inoculation’ (Potter 1996), which covers a variety of ways in which factual claims are managed with regard to potential rebuttals based on the claimant’s stake or interest. The device in this case is that the reporter’s bias in pursuit of the story, if bias should arise at all, is formulated as favourable rather than critical. This also nicely supports the notion of a story

that just ‘came out’, discovered, and unlooked for – which we have noted is another device in the construction of factual claims.

Phillips’s accountability, and that of the *Sunday Express* and its editor, in relation to getting the facts straight, had been raised in a midweek *Times* headline, ‘Hospital says paper knew abortion had happened’. The accompanying article included the text of Extract 5.

**Extract 5** (*Times* 9 August 1996 p. 2)

- 1 Yesterday the hospital said: “It is true that Caroline Phillips [the
- 2 reporter] was told that the operation had been done. We are not
- 3 accusing the *Sunday Express* or Caroline Phillips of lying, but we
- 4 do think there has been a misunderstanding here.
- 5 “Professor Bennett was certain in his own mind that Miss Phillips
- 6 understood it had already happened, but if she is now saying that
- 7 she didn’t understand then that is possible and we have to accept
- 8 that. Professor Bennett says he was told by the paper that the
- 9 present tense was used in the copy as a journalistic device because
- 10 it was a feature rather than a news report . . .”

As it did previously (Extract 3), the *Times* positioned itself two days later (Extract 5) somewhere above the dispute, with no stake of its own, and for whom all participants were merely folk to be quoted – hospitals, doctors, (other) newspapers and journalists alike – in pursuit of what really happened. Here it presented a flat contradiction and the possibility, if the hospital was to be believed, of either malpractice or incompetence on the part of the *Express*. Like Professor Bennett (Extract 2), the hospital (as quoted) was careful to avoid any damaging consequences of such an overtly flat denial, allowing instead for a misunderstanding on the journalist’s part, which is delicately phrased as something she is ‘now saying’ (line 6), and that ‘we have to accept’ (line 7). So according to the hospital, Phillips was clearly informed of the facts (lines 1–2, and 5), but she may have misunderstood them (lines 4 and 7). The *Times* itself reports these matters from a more lofty position, its objective neutrality accomplished textually by placing the contradictions, their resolutions, and the issue of ‘lying’, entirely within quotations from the main protagonists.

The claim that Professor Bennett was shown, and approved, a draft of the article (Extract 4) is now supported by the notion that, according to the hospital, he inquired about the article’s use of present tense (Extract 5, lines 8–10). The same *Times* article includes a quote from Bennett, to the effect that he received a draft and ‘changed it to the past tense and faxed it back’ (*Times* 9 August p. 2), but that a later copy sent to him retained its objectionable present tense. The *Times* quotes the *Sunday Express*’s editor, Sue Douglas, as flatly contradicting the doctor on that. This is the point where newspaper content categories get explicitly used in the paper itself. According to Bennett, as quoted in the *Times*, ‘he was told by the paper that the present tense was used in the copy as a journalistic device because it was a feature rather than a news report’ (Extract 5, lines 8–10). So the factual basis of the entire journalistic ‘fiasco’ (as

the *Express's* direct rival the *Daily Mail* called it on 7 August), concerning whether an event had happened or was about to, boiled down to the textual conventions of the item as a discussion feature or a news announcement.<sup>4</sup> At least, that became the *Express's* story, or one of them.

### FACTS, ISSUES, AND RED HERRINGS

For Caroline Phillips of the *Sunday Express*, the time had come to assert the original article's status as a 'Focus' feature on social issues and medical ethics, rather than a news announcement of some specific event. The factual reporting issue (and the concern for factual accuracy entailed by that) was, after all, a 'red herring' (Extract 6), despite that same factual news being the prime focus of her own paper's original editorial on the matter.

**Extract 6** (Caroline Phillips *Sunday Express* 11 August 1996 p. 13)

- 1 We should be thankful to him [Bennett] for opening the debate
- 2 and hope that the issues do not become obfuscated by the red
- 3 herring of whether the termination has or has not yet taken place.

This new article bemoaned in its headline how the 'compassionate' Professor Bennett had become 'a target of hate'. In examining this new journalistic turn, it is important to recognize that Phillips *herself* was accountable (at least potentially) for causing the uptake of the abortion as a future event, for being the prime locus of all the misunderstandings (as in Extract 5), the main catalyst in the ensuing flurry of financial and emotional bids to 'save the twin' (e.g. 6 August: *Independent* p. 3; *Daily Mail* p. 1; *Daily Express* p. 4). She was also responsible for the subsequent and potentially embarrassing 'revelation' that the abortion had already taken place, obviating the court injunction to stop it. By not reporting that the abortion had already taken place Phillips became available to charges of journalistic incompetence or distortion.

One way that she managed these difficulties textually, was by casting her subject and interviewee, Professor Bennett, as the debate's initiator (Extract 6, line 1). Phillips effectively wrote herself out of any agency for the events, omitting both her role as the journalist/interviewer in pursuit of a medical ethics and abortion story, and whose story it was. The key agent was the obstetrician, whose agency was granted by the same textual flourish that excused him: he should be *thanked* for what he did, in opening a debate on the topic (Extract 6, line 1). Having identified Bennett as the debate's originator, and having sided with him as unreasonably a 'victim of hate', Phillips displayed her own reasonable perspective by rising to his defence. She applauded Bennett for alerting us to the dilemmas, and glossed the issue of whether or not the abortion had taken place as an irrelevant 'red herring'.

Phillips was now so non-agentive in the production of her story, that she was reading it along with the rest of us – she was one of 'we' who should be thankful to Bennett, and in aligning with us, she spoke not only to, but *for* the reading

public in thanking him. In doing so, she and the *Express* were indexically restored as the voices of accuracy and reason, aligned on the side of debate and compassion, avoiding the 'red herrings' that had muddled the rival press, and focusing on the real issues. In defending Bennett, and shifting the ground from facts to issues, Phillips displayed herself as objective (cf. Tuchman 1972), able and qualified to advise against becoming entangled in a confusion of side issues. Given that the 'red herring' (whether or not the abortion had already taken place) was information for which Phillips herself was potentially responsible, her caution against getting caught up in those issues is readable as a way of managing her accountability.

The uncertainty over whether the abortion had already occurred was reflected in the coverage of the story following the Phillips and Hadfield article, with reports that echoed the issue of moral dilemmas in a wider debate on embryo research, and/or treated the story as a news item. For example, the following day the *Times* (5 August pp. 1–2) explicitly treated the abortion as a past event. Its front page headlines announced 'BMA backs doctor who aborted twin', and inside on page 2, was a picture of Bennett with the caption 'Professor Bennett: decided which foetus to destroy'. Similarly, a description in the *Mirror* the same day (5 August p. 4) reported that '. . . Phillip Bennett, who performed the termination, was reluctant to abort the healthy twin'. Yet on Tuesday 6 August 1996, many of the national dailies covered the news that 'Miss B' had just been offered a sum of money in order to persuade her not to abort one of her twins. This clearly implied that the abortion was yet to happen. Kennedy's second *Times* report treated it likewise and, in its Tuesday edition, announced the offer of cash (p. 5) stating that Bennett 'will not pass on the offers to his patient, who has *yet to abort her healthy 16-week-old foetus*' (emphasis added).

The *Sunday Express*'s own 'Opinion' column, in the same edition as the original story, also explicitly treated the abortion as yet to happen. In this editorial comment the interview on moral dilemmas was packaged as an item on the *imminence* of a 'selective reduction' (*Sunday Express* 4 August 1996).

**Extract 7** (*Sunday Express* 4 August 1996 p. 20)

- 1 Today we reveal that a British doctor is to terminate one of two
- 2 healthy twins, using a technique which was originally developed to
- 3 cope with the problematic multiple pregnancies caused by certain
- 4 fertility treatments. Why? Because their mother-to-be says she
- 5 "couldn't cope with two babies". The furore that is bound to follow
- 6 this news will be even less surprising.

As shown in Extract 7, this took the form of an overt news announcement: 'Today we reveal that . . .' (line 1), 'this news' (line 6). The content of that news was both the decision to terminate the life of a healthy foetus (lines 1–2) in order to create a 'designer family' (a phrase used later in the same article), and the fact that the event was yet to happen (line 1, 'is to terminate'). The editorial alerted us to the 'furore' (lines 5–6) which was 'bound to' follow the newspaper's

revelation. In alerting us to that furore, and in conveying its own emotive opinion on the events, the paper began to fulfil its own prophesy of a heated reaction.<sup>5</sup> While engaging actively in that debate, the expression 'bound to' (line 5) depicted the *Sunday Express* as nevertheless somewhat passive, as engaging in something that had its own momentum and inevitability. This is a recurrent feature of journalistic rhetoric, being part of how news-making and news-writing are constructed as factual, as merely reflecting events, downplaying journalists' own agency and artfulness in producing versions.<sup>6</sup>

### DESIGNER FAMILIES AND ABORTION POLICY

The real moral issue, according to *Express* 'Opinion', was not that doctors are in a position of 'playing God' (*Sunday Express* 4 August 1996 p. 20), but that 'it is usually the women concerned who decide whether or not to terminate a pregnancy'. 'Opinion' called for a change in the law, to prevent 'such frivolous abuse' of abortion, as women choosing "'selective reduction" simply to produce the designer family' (*Sunday Express* 4 August 1996). The opinion of the newspaper was that abortion was in danger of being treated too flippantly, with various ostensible quotations exemplifying this.

For example, the column cites Miss B's words as a direct quotation from her, that she "'couldn't cope with two babies'" (Extract 7, lines 4–5). The same paper's editorial also quoted Miss B's reasons indirectly (Extract 8, line 2), using somewhat different words, as part of setting up a general moral issue.

**Extract 8** (*Sunday Express* 4 August 1996 p. 20)

- 1 what to do when the woman decides she wants a selective abortion
- 2 "simply because she can't cope with twins"
- 3 or because she only wants a boy, for example?

If we take Phillips and Hadfield's article as the primary source of information for the editorial, then the quoted speech is most likely derived from Phillips's interview with Bennett, and his disclosure that Miss B, who crops up merely as an example (and remains unidentified), 'cannot abide the prospect of having two children. She says she couldn't cope' (Extract 1). This is itself a formulation of what Bennett is reported to have said, in telling a story about someone called 'Miss B' who is purported to have said that she couldn't cope. It is not therefore Miss B's actual voice, actual words, that we read in *any* of these quotations, direct or indirect, but the rhetorical device of bringing her alive as a narrative character (cf. Wooffitt 1992).

In Phillips and Hadfield's original report (Extract 1), Miss B's role was that of an instance of a *doctor's* dilemma, where the obstetrician had to choose whether or not to perform an abortion, and if so, which twin to abort. However, in the editorial, Miss B is used more directly to illustrate the 'frivolous abuse' of abortion. It is she, not the obstetrician, who is now the agent of choice, and who decides *she wants* a selective abortion (Extract 8, line 1). Unlike Professor

Bennett, who is portrayed as someone who faces a difficult decision, in the editorial Miss B's choice gives no indication of any such moral struggle. Not only does she decide to have an abortion, she *wants* one. While it is difficult to imagine real-life circumstances in which any woman would actually *want to have an abortion*, as she might want to write poetry, take a holiday, or grow hollyhocks, this is how Miss B is portrayed – wanting an abortion ‘simply because she can't cope with twins’ (line 2). The word ‘simply’ builds the flippancy of such a decision, while also heading off any search for good reasons other than the one given. And a decision *directly quoted* is thereby not one dreamed up for effect or hypothetically, say, by the ‘Opinion’ column, but a real one, ‘simply’ said, just like that, context-free and (therefore) frivolous.

Miss B's decision is further rendered frivolous contrastively, in terms of the medical procedure having a more serious and prior purpose – its use in problematic multiple pregnancies caused by fertility treatments. This ‘abuse’ is generalized to the kinds of choices pregnant women might make, such as aborting one healthy twin because the woman says she can't cope with two, or because she ‘only wants a boy’ (Extract 8, line 3). This second editorial example, of a ‘frivolous’ reason for abortion, is strikingly emotive. It is linked with the ‘can't cope’ quotation as part of a list of lame-looking reasons that might be given for ‘selective abortion.’ Its proximity to the quote places it into a credible sequence, as part of an alarming picture of where things might be headed if we are not careful. Selectively aborting a foetus because it is the wrong sex is situated inside an escalating progression from selective terminations for medical reasons, through selective termination because the woman can't cope, to selective termination in order to design a family – the gender issue is ‘for example’ (line 3), which is to say, only for starters.

The editorial column concludes its argument against the abuse of abortion by stating that a line must be drawn to prevent “‘selective reduction” simply to produce the designer family’ (*Sunday Express* 4 August p. 20). Here, once again, the use of ‘simply’ implies a decision flippantly made, decontextualized from any sort of reasoning or circumstance, with the outcome of such ‘abuse’ being the production of ‘designer families’. The latter is an expression that links building families to the worlds of fashion and advertizing. In this scenario (the editorial ‘Opinion’), abortions become a frivolous lifestyle choice, rather than one driven by morals and necessity. The term ‘designer’ economically packages a host of possible connotations in which babies become fashion accessories that, along with designer T-shirts, jeans, sunglasses, kitchens, and deodorants, can be acquired and disposed of as and when we fancy.

The image of families-by-design is built upon the provocative editorial warning that gender might be used as a reason for abortion. We need to remember, however, that both the gender example, and the notion of ‘designer families’, were imaginative extrapolations from an original, already factually contentious story of an obstetrician faced with a specific dilemma. But it was the fictional extrapolation that became emblematic in calls for changes in the

Abortion Act. On Friday 16 August 1996, many of the daily papers quoted Elizabeth Peacock, a Conservative MP (Member of Parliament), calling for a review in the Abortion Act, and stating that it was not intended 'to allow people to have designer families'. Similar sentiments were widely canvassed on 9 August 1996, on the *Mail's* front page, in the *Star* (p. 4), the *Guardian* (p. 3), the *Independent* (p. 4), the *Times* (p. 6), and the *Express* (front page).

### SETTING THE WORLD TALKING: A PRESS DILEMMA

The reports of politicians calling for changes in the law reinforced the *Express's* image of itself (Extract 10, below) as able to set social and political agendas, and to influence important decisions and government legislation. But this is a two-edged sword, requiring careful textual management. The entire notion of a newspaper having an influence can easily run counter to another major rhetorical line, which is the notion that the press do no such thing, that they merely reflect opinion, voice public concerns and report facts, *relaying* (as 'media') rather than constructing and affecting what goes on in the world. Like parents and doctors, newspapers have dilemmas of their own, and these include the management of fact and opinion, news and feature, report and editorial, and the various newspaper content categories and headings within which, and through which, such matters are handled. As with ideological dilemmas generally (Billig et al. 1988), both horns can be rhetorically useful.

In the final *Daily Express* story in the 'designer families' series, the paper's front page headlines (Extract 9) announced an impending policy change:

**Extract 9** (*Daily Express* 16 August 1996 front page headlines)

- 1 MPs call for law change after our revelations about abortion twin
- 2 NOW TELL US ALL THE FACTS

The dilemma between *influencing* and *reflecting* important events was managed by a division of labour, or of agency. The 'call for change' is done by politicians, while what the *Express* was responsible for were 'revelations'. These are reported in temporal sequence: revelations followed by calls. But as in any narrative sequence, what follows is canonically what follows *from* (for examples see Genette 1980; Labov and Waletzky 1967; Toolan 1988; Woolgar 1980). So the newspaper did its job, revealing the facts, and now the politicians are doing theirs, which is acting upon them. As for the facts, these are merely 'revealed', and passed on, rather than, say, worked up in the writing. The paper's own call, 'Now tell us all the facts', is clearly not to itself as an information producer, but to its sources, in this case the doctors, the hospitals, their clients, and any other protagonist-interviewees involved in designing the nation's families. It is as if those 'tellings' were somehow independent of the paper's reportings.

Yet the opportunity for taking credit for political policy changes was also hard to resist, given the marketing appeal of a newspaper with its finger on the nation's pulse, and from which its rivals might be shown to have taken a lead. It

was the *Express's* story that 'set the world talking' (Extract 10, headline), and the more influence it had, the stronger that claim could be.

**Extract 10** (*Daily Express* 16 August 1996 p. 5)

- 1 HOW THE EXPRESS SET THE WORLD TALKING
- 2 The Daily Express set the news agenda yesterday with our
- 3 exclusive revelations about the truth behind Miss B.
- 4 Our story not only dominated radio and TV bulletins at home but
- 5 was flashed around the globe.
- 6 It was already a lead item at breakfast time when Radio 4's Today
- 7 programme held a debate between MPs and the hospital.
- 8 By lunchtime the controversy had become one of the main stories
- 9 on ITN news. Our front page headline – Truth About Aborted
- 10 Twin – was shown to millions of viewers across the country.
- 11 And by early evening the debate generated by our story made it a
- 12 lead item on ITN news and one of the main pieces on BBC TV's Six
- 13 O' Clock News.
- 14 Meanwhile, MPs held up our story as proof that Britain's abortion
- 15 law has to be changed.

Extract 10 shows how the *Express* elaborated its headlined claim in some detail, and with evident pride in leading the rest of the media, and even Parliament itself. Yet its claimed role in events remained that of reporting them rather than shaping them. In this rhetorical context, of championing its own virtues, that role was enhanced to having 'set the news agenda' (line 2), which is a recognizable formula in media circles for indirect but powerful influence. The division of labour, between factual reporting and policy making, became more blurred in lines 14–15, where the *Express* story figured as 'proof that Britain's law has to be changed', and the image was of MPs holding up copies of the paper in the House. And yet it was an image nicely managed: it was not the *Express* that (directly) claimed the story as proof, but the MPs who held it up.

This final *Express* coverage (16 August) put a last resounding boot into Bennett and his profession, drawing a clear and conclusive line of demarcation concerning responsibility for the *Express's* controversial story. Guilt lay with its sources ('the doctors', Extract 11 below) rather than itself. The article quoted various MPs and campaigners demanding a change in the law, including Liberal Democrat politician David Alton who accused the hospital of 'perpetuating enormous lies'. Note that the *hospital* was accused of lies and deception, while the newspaper itself, where those 'lies' had been printed as straightforward reportage, was explicitly held up as having informed the public of the truth. For example, anti-abortionist Jack Scarisbrick was quoted saying that 'what the *Express* has shown makes this story more shocking than ever' (*Express* 16 August p. 5). Anti-abortionist Phyllis Bowman was quoted as saying 'the *Daily Express* has given a prime example of what is happening under the present [abortion] Act'.

**Extract 11** (*Daily Express* 16 August 1996 p. 8)

- 1 So, too, is the colossal arrogance which inspired the doctors
- 2 involved *first* to reveal what they were doing in the hope that we
- 3 would be impressed, *second* to mislead about the circumstances to
- 4 make it seem more acceptable, and *third* to issue lofty condemnations
- 5 of the Press when their stunt went wrong.
- 6 In a misguided attempt to give details of the case without
- 7 identifying the patient, they misled the public and *then* tried to snuff
- 8 out debate by going to law to stop the truth emerging. For those
- 9 involved at Queen Charlotte's Hospital, what began as a useful
- 10 exercise in publicity became a squalid cover-up.

In the article that included Extract 11, *Express* journalist Peter Hitchens glossed the story as a publicity exercise on the part of the hospital (lines 9–10). Traces of the original *Sunday Express* interview were generally removed. What we had now was no longer a serendipitous remark that 'came out' during an interview instigated and reported by journalist Caroline Phillips. As we saw in Extracts 2 and 3, the context for the doctor's remarks appeared to be that the journalist was looking to write a feature on doctors' abortion dilemmas, and he cited the case of Miss B in response to a question: 'The story came out when I asked him what was the most difficult dilemma he had ever faced' (Extract 3). By 16 August, agency for the story's emergence lay entirely with the hospital, who were engaged in a 'stunt' that went wrong. The details were very damning. Agency was built by the provision of *motives* on the source's part that had nothing to do with co-operating with a reporter's inquiries ('colossal arrogance', 'the hope that we would be impressed', 'a squalid cover-up', etc.). Self-serving motives of that kind, being a basis for talk's content other than getting the facts straight, provide for lies and distortions.

Another feature of Extract 11 is the way that Bennett's role as original source and major protagonist is dissolved into various *pluralities* such as 'the doctors', and 'those involved at Queen Charlotte's Hospital'. This accomplishes at least two rhetorical moves. First, it distracts the reader from the original interview and, thereby, from the *Express's* role in obtaining and writing up the story, and specifically from Caroline Phillips's involvement. Certainly Hitchens's version of extreme medical hubris contrasts strongly with Caroline Phillips's interim efforts at repair, concerning the 'compassionate' Professor Bennett, the 'red herring' of factual accuracy, and the various versions of a 'misunderstanding' between them (see discussion of Extract 6 above). Attention is shifted away from the entire *journalistic* muddle, and on to the medics themselves, whose pride came before their fall.

Second, it raises the story's profile and importance. Remarks by a single doctor in a one-off interview are one thing, but a planned campaign by a larger body, and even the profession itself, to 'mislead' the public and then complain about the press (Extract 11, lines 3–5) is another. Hitchens warns in the article of the danger of treating medics like celebrities, with 'the case of Miss B' (p. 8)

given as a salutary example of what happens when the medical profession is given too much power. Again the irony is lost, that the *Express* itself had started the story with a big picture and splash headlines about Bennett on its front page, which was, as the newspaper in other contexts (Extract 10) was proud to boast, what 'set the world talking' and generated whatever celebrity Bennett subsequently enjoyed. That is one irony amongst many, of course. The others include the notion that it was the doctors rather than the *Express* who sought a huge public airing of these matters, who instigated the story's publication, who got their facts wrong, and whose self glorification (again, see Extract 10) coloured the entire business from start to finish.

## CONCLUSION

Our study has three main foci:

1. how fact and accountability are managed;
2. how descriptive categories figure as rhetorical resources;
3. relations between press reporting and its normative concerns.

All three are studied as textual matters, oriented-to and managed within the texts themselves, being part of how those texts work, as newspaper reports.

An important key to the analysis is the way in which these three foci and their various components work together. Fact and accountability, both for the journalists and for their sources and critics, arose with regard to whether a foetus had already been aborted, or was about to be. One way of dealing with that factual issue, once it became an issue of *journalistic* accountability, was to separate the reports from their sources, and isolate the sources as the origin of trouble and error. This began within a few days of the initial report, and culminated in a picture of the medical profession's vainly motivated conspiracy to mislead the public.

Another way of dealing with fact and accountability, in addition to blaming sources, was to deploy a formulation of the normative characteristics of 'features' and 'news' items. This occurred as part of a 'misunderstanding' and 'confusion' treatment of what had happened between reporters and their sources, prior to the eventual all-out attack on the latter. The notion deployed was that textual details such as verb tenses, while all-important when it comes to news reporting and the time sequence of actual events, are merely features of textual style in feature writing, such that the confusion was dual and related: between reporter and source, and between news report and topical feature.

The inherent fuzziness and overlaps, between newspaper content categories, are a recognized nuisance when doing coded and quantified content analysis. But it is not only an accidental fuzziness, to be resolved via more precise (or cruder) coding definitions and measures of inter-coder reliability. It may also have a systematic importance with regard to how newspapers accomplish their business. That business involves managing various dilemmas of fact and

accountability, dilemmas between agency and passivity in the construction of reports and commentaries, and in the distinction between reporting, discussing issues, and overt campaigning. As with formal scientific reports, which are conventionally (normatively) sub-divided into sections such as Method, Results, Discussion (etc.), separating findings and interpretations, and specifying data sources, newspapers are also accountable for separating what actually happened and what people said, from what slant or angle the paper puts upon those things. That accountability is not just something that may be handled in behind-the-scenes comments and interviews, but is an oriented-to feature of newspaper content. Content categories figure as useful rhetorical categories under which facts, accounts, sources, purposes and motives, reflections and influences, and so on, are handled.

The *Sunday Express's* 'Focus' category, operating in the fuzzy space between news and topical feature, was exploited twice. First it was used in presenting the story, as both a feature and a news splash. This is what enabled the shift from the hospital's and/or doctor's status as an instance of a dilemma raised and pursued by the newspaper itself, into a news announcement of an actual, imminent event. Second, it was used in accounting for the controversy afterwards, as a matter not of incompetence or deceit, but of confusion, misunderstanding, a use of tense, a general issue rather than an actual event, whose accurate reporting could then be dismissed as a 'red herring'. It opened up the rhetorical space for the *Express* to blame its sources for its reporting errors.

In parallel to the abortion dilemma, and as a feature of its reporting, the press was involved in some pervasively relevant dilemmas of its own. What is the press's proper (normative) role in providing information, and in the shaping of opinion and policy – to produce or relay, to campaign or report, to shape or reflect? Who are the agents and recipients of information: the journalists themselves, their sources, the politicians, or the public at large? Rather than treating these questions as definitively answerable, via a sub-division of actual roles and responsibilities in acts of communication, we have analysed how they were discursively managed as elements of journalistic practice itself, and specifically as oriented-to concerns of newspaper texts. Agency or passivity, originator or relay, are alternative positions that, rather than being true or false in practice, are available to be worked up in different rhetorical contexts. Where they start to become blurred, that is also rhetorically exploitable, but the divisions can always be restored. The trick is to construct and make relevant the very divisions of labour that might be normatively presumed all along: the press reports the facts, and politicians make policies. Sources provide information, and reporters relay it. If the press gets things wrong, then their sources got them wrong.

Although this study takes various specific newspaper texts as its object, the analytic themes have a much broader relevance, not only to the workings of news media, but to the workings of discourse in general. The close relationship between event reports or descriptions, event explanations, and the management

of actors' and reporters' identity and credibility, are major themes in the analysis of a wide variety of kinds of talk and text (Antaki 1994; Edwards 1997; Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter 1996). The approach is to examine how considerations such as fact and accountability are handled textually in the materials under investigation, rather than to approach them as issues that analysts might adopt as their own concerns and try to resolve, just as participants themselves do. The scope of the approach is that it permits issues such as factual accuracy, credibility, the status of sources, objectivity, bias, explanation, and so on, to be examined as constructed and rhetorical categories, as discourse categories, performative of whatever business the texts are handling, irrespective of any external or behind-the-scenes criteria as to the facts of the matter.

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## NOTES

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2. 'Designer family' is a term arising from a suggestion that selective abortions, given on demand, will result in their misuse. The phrase was introduced in the editorial *Sunday Express* 'Opinion' column (4 August 1996 p. 20), as a comment on the abortion story featured on its front cover and inside pages.
3. Although the front page headlines of Phillips and Hadfield's story in the *Sunday Express* (4 August 1996 p. 1) proclaim 'Abortion of the healthy twin', neutralizing tense through nominalization, the text following the headlines is written in present tense, as appropriate both for a generalized issue, and for a still relevant dilemma.
4. Gaye Tuchman (1978) notes that newswriters have difficulty in judging whether an item is properly defined as news or feature, and in describing differences between such categories as 'hard' and 'soft' news. Vague distinctions are offered, such as hard news being "simply" the stuff of which news presentations are made' (Tuchman 1978: 47), or soft news being reports of 'human foibles' (48). See also McQuail (1983: 267) on how journalists decide what 'news' is, in terms of 'feel', 'intuition', and 'innate judgement'. Our 'discursive' approach is that this proposed difficulty of categorizing news is not merely a nuisance for analysts, nor an opportunity to display content analytic expertise, nor evidence that journalists do not know what they are doing. Rather, it figures as a useful conceptual resource deployed normatively and rhetorically as part of journalistic practice and accountability.
5. The *Daily Express*, in depicting the likely public response to the story as an ensuing storm, continued to fulfil its own editorial prophesy. On 7 August (p. 6) John Coles reported that 'health chiefs are known to be concerned about the furore' and, on 8 August (p. 5), reflected on Bennett as a 'broken man' who had 'no idea an interview with the newspaper about the ethics of his job would cause such a furore'.
6. Agency and artfulness may also be *claimed*, of course, as part of how good stories are found and written up, where these are what distinguish good journalists from

mediocre ones. It is agency and artfulness in the production of *facts themselves* that are at issue here. As with photojournalism, the prizes are for being there, perceiving and getting the picture, and presenting it effectively, not for developing and printing it.

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**APPENDIX:** The original *Sunday Express* article (only Extract 1 is taken directly from this original article, which contains much interesting material that we do not analyse or pursue here).

## FOCUS 2

As embryo debate rages, a doctor reveals the most controversial case yet of 'selective' abortion

*A mother wanted me to abort one of her healthy twins. It may sound unethical but it was either that or for both babies to die*

By Caroline Phillips  
& Greg Hadfield

Professor Phillip Bennett faces a dilemma. His patient, 16 weeks pregnant, is carrying healthy twins and cannot abide the prospect of having two children. She says she couldn't cope.

She has told Mr Bennett, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at London's Queen Charlotte's Hospital, that if she were carrying just one baby, she would continue her pregnancy.

His patient, Miss B, is a 28-year-old single parent in socially straitened circumstances. She has one child already.

So should Mr Bennett terminate this naturally conceived pregnancy? Or abort one of the twins? And, if so, which one? He does, after all, know their sexes but won't divulge whether he has told his patient.

*"Killing one healthy twin sounds unethical," says Mr Bennett. "But my colleagues and I concluded this week that it would be better to terminate one pregnancy as soon as possible and leave one alive than to lose two babies.*

*"A needle is stuck into the baby to kill it," he adds, referring to the foetus as a baby, "risking the death of both babies. The mother then carries the dead baby full term, although it shrivels and mummifies."*

Mr Bennett believes this may be the first case of its kind in Britain. His team perform five such "selective terminations" a year. But up to now all have been IVF cases and were carried out only because of foetal abnormality.

Government figures show the number of selective terminations is soaring. They more than doubled to 73 in 1994, while unofficial estimates put last year's figures at more than 100.

Mr Bennett has terminated 3,000 pregnancies in 10 years, a rate of around five every week, and delivered nearly the same number of live babies. He does an increasing number of second and third trimester terminations at which other doctors balk.

He will perform an abortion even when a woman is nearly full term, up to 40 weeks pregnant, and has done "a handful" of such very late terminations.

*"Legally you can terminate a pregnancy right up to the moment of delivery if the baby would be seriously handicapped. I would have no difficulty terminating if we detected a foetal abnormality," he says.*

Mr Bennett, who has cropped hair and a crisp voice, has never before spoken publicly. He

is worried about talking and reluctant to be photographed because of the aggression of some of the pro-lifers.

We're in Queen Charlotte's, which is a world leader in foetal research. It is here that Mr Bennett's partner, Professor Nicholas Fisk, has shown that 24-week-old foetuses mount stress responses to painful stimuli and so may be capable of feeling pain. We're talking just before the destruction of 3,000 unclaimed frozen embryos in British clinics.

Mr Bennett agrees to terminations "virtually at a mother's request," if legal. He carries out the majority before 24 weeks. "They're healthy but unwanted, terminated for psychological not medical reasons. After that the law permits terminations only if there is a prospect of serious handicap.

All his terminations are done under the health service. The most brutal method, the D & E (dilation and evacuation), is the one in which the pregnancy is removed surgically while the mother is anaesthetised.

*"I dismember the foetus, pull it apart limb by limb and remove it piece by piece. I don't find it pleasant but I'm of sufficiently tough constitution to do it."*

He prefers this because it is least stressful for the mother.

Before 12 weeks he uses the vacuum aspiration "Hoover" technique. Between 12 and 24 weeks he induces labour and delivers a dead foetus or performs a D & E.

The extraordinary aspect to this discussion is that Mr Bennett believes abortion is morally wrong.

"Broadly speaking, it is better not to interfere with life," he says. "I don't draw any major distinctions between embryos, foetuses and new born babies in terms of existence. The law allows us to terminate pregnancies at 24 weeks on the flimsiest of grounds, yet babies at 24 weeks can survive.

"The 24 weeks isn't truly based on a concept of viability. Viability is a moveable feast – until recently it was 28 weeks. But the foetus has rights only as defined by law."

Because of scientific advances, he and other doctors face many predicaments. Take the issue of foetal pain. It has not yet been identified when foetuses feel pain. Some pro-lifers maintain it is as early as 10 weeks. But Mr Bennett thinks it unlikely before 12 weeks, due to the lack of central nervous system development. "I'd anticipate that a baby at 20 plus weeks can feel pain."

Accordingly, 18 months ago Mr Bennett changed his practice in second trimester terminations. "I divide the umbilical cord, removing the blood supply to the baby's brain. Hopefully, the baby will not then experience pain or the physical violence of a D & E."

But he doesn't think anaesthetic should be administered to the foetus.

"None of us can remember the agony of being born, the pain of being forcibly squeezed through a passageway so small that the bones of your head actually ride over each other," he says. He also faces moral difficulties in assessing abnormalities. "With hydrocephalus, or water on the brain, there's a risk of mental retardation. But the majority of babies born with it have surgery and are normal.

*"I have the dilemma of deciding how severe it is and how to present that information to the mother."*

"Counselling is meant to be nondirectional. But the way you present the facts means that patients generally make the choice you want them to make. The Abortion Act places the doctor in the position of God." The development of the abortion pill RU486 – Mifipristone – presents another quandary. "It's an ethical dilemma because in theory we could make such pills freely available to women and they could be entirely in control of their own abortions."

He also sees a predicament when Down's syndrome is identified in the third trimester. "Down's people, if you ask them, mostly say they'd prefer to be alive than dead. My interpretation of the Abortion Act is that after 24 weeks termination has to be to the benefit of the foetus. In such cases, it clearly isn't."

He does not see the unclaimed embryos as a problem. "Extreme views calling it pre-natal massacre don't have any value in the real world."

So what is it in Mr Bennett that allows him to do terminations, particularly ones that other doctors cannot face? He recalls the first birth he attended, aged 20, as "wonderful, an emotional moment standing at the start of somebody's life". But he cannot remember his first termination. "It didn't have much of an affect on me."

Mr Bennett does it because he sees a human need, terminations being better than the long term harm of unwanted pregnancies. And as a Christian, who went to church regularly as a child. And because he doesn't think people should impose their moral views. And because he believes that the only person who can and should decide on termination is the mother, not, as is currently law, two doctors.

*He compares his "gory" work to a pathologist's. "By the 100th post mortem he's not really affected. The same applies to me. You do things that are unpleasant because you think they're the right thing to do. Two hours later I've forgotten them."*

Mr Bennett has no children and does not want any. "I don't think that bears any relation to my work, although many of my colleagues say that once they have children their feelings change."

Is he a murderer? "Not in a legal sense because I'm not breaking the law. But in a moral and emotional sense I am terminating a life." How does he distinguish between termination and infanticide? "It's an interesting concept that once a baby is born we cannot kill it. But I'm not sure there is any difference, other than that the law is different."

Mr Bennett is far from being alone in his quandary. Professor Kypros Nicolaidis, who helped pioneer the termination procedures at London's King's College Hospital, says: "We have had reservations from the first day. You have to decide whether you would be prepared, despite your reservations, to carry out selective termination."

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