

# No doctor thinks that abortions are good



By Caroline Phillips

**P**ROFESSOR Phillip Bennett has been vilified over the past week as a national hate figure. Most of the time he has been holed up in his West London house behind closed curtains with his girlfriend Lisa and his two cats. We have spoken on the phone. But now he has disconnected his phone and fax. He is a prisoner in his own home.

*He is doorstepped continuously by the Press. When I went to talk to him on Friday we spoke through the letter box.*

"I can't open the door even for you Caroline," he said.

When first we met, obstetrician Bennett expressed a reluctance to be photographed because of the hostile tendency of some pro-lifers. Does he fear now for his safety? He does not deserve this. A man speaking in a country which is supposed to have free speech.

The fact that he told me he was — or had already, as it turns out in a dramatic revelation following our interview — to abort a healthy twin has incited international debate. The fact that he talked about terminating a foetus up until the moment it is born was shocking too.

But I had asked him to elucidate on how technological advances are posing doctors with moral dilemmas. What is the responsibility of doctors? Where is technology leading us?

These are issues that should rightly be debated.

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

I had asked him about his most difficult moral decisions. He then told me of the mother, pregnant with twins. He mentioned her case anecdotally in a discussion about moral issues. Now he regrets it bitterly.

But he was careful never to identify her.

I had a confidential phone conversation with him last week. We are both clear that there was a genuine misunderstanding over the date of the termination, generated by his attempt to protect the mother's identity.

*My first impression of Bennett was of someone honourable, forthright and straightforward. It endures.*

He was raised in Kent and educated at Gravesend grammar school and London University. Bennett is a Christian who was bought up in the United Reformed Church. "I see myself as a Christian in that I generally try to do what is right," he told me.

He is also a jazz pianist and

loves DIY. "I like pulling things apart and rebuilding them." How would he describe his character? "I'm resilient. My girlfriend calls me Mr Immediate because when I decide to do something, I do it straight away. I'm decisive."

He is a deeply contradictory man. Since publication, some people have described him as callous and flippant. That is because of the stark and dramatic nature of the quotes consolidated from a two-hour interview. Certainly he is made of stern stuff and has handled this week with stoicism.

**B**UT he is not inured to what he is doing. He is compassionate. At the same time, he is a pragmatist who applies logic to emotional issues.

"You won't find any doctor who thinks termination is a good thing to do, none of us do it because we want to do it," he said.

"That is why I strongly object to the view that I am a pro-termination person. I'd be very happy if we didn't need to do them — but we would need much better and more effective methods of contraception and much better social facilities for those people who have unwanted pregnancies.

"If people with unwanted pregnancies are compelled to continue, the effect socially and psychologically would be unacceptable. Therefore you're

doing more good than harm by terminating their pregnancies. It's a Benthamite philosophy that you do the thing which produces the most global good in this context.

"I haven't become blasé about it. But you do unpleasant things in life because you think they're the right thing to do."

Bennett does not himself perform selective abortions. He does not have the necessary skills. It is his team who perform five such selective terminations a year. He is a brilliant obstetrician whose principle areas of research are pre-term labour and pre-natal diagnosis of inherited disease.

He does normal terminations because his "overriding moral position is that it is up to a woman to decide whether she should terminate a pregnancy".

His path was partly determined after he became involved in the second trimester termination of pregnancy in 1983.

"I appreciated what an unpleasant business it was for everybody. The mother would be induced and it would usually take place in the night and she would be alone with one or two nursing staff on duty. It was a rather sordid and unpleasant way of terminating a pregnancy."

He performs the surgically brutal D & E because it is "much less unpleasant for the mother" and also because he has "empathy with people who have aborted pregnancies that they want. We should offer them a service which gives them the best psychological outcome."

*His philosophy is even more pertinent following last week's events.*

"I believe everybody should be entitled to their own positions on termination. A doctor who has strong beliefs shouldn't be obliged to be involved. Those who hold strong views shouldn't impose them. I don't think it is right that people who hold moral views should prevent people who want their pregnancies terminated."

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