Caroline de Costa

Former IFPA volunteer Caroline de Costa recalls condom smuggling and the contraception train

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Cairns is a city in North Queensland, which is that pointy bit of Australia to the top right on a map. Cairns is well-known to many Irish backpackers as the stopping-off point on their way to the Great Barrier Reef; probably few of them know that there is also a thriving medical school here, to which I have been attached since 1999. My appearance in the IFPA Newsletter is related to the years I spent in the 1970s as a student at RCSI in Dublin, and then as a registrar at the Coombe, and my association then with the newly-hatched IFPA.

I was fortunate as a Surgeons’ student to be taught by the very inspiring late Dr Anne Legge who I believe was a founding member of the IFPA. She was a great role model for the women students of my era, at that time we were definitely a minority! I was privileged to attend, through her good offices, some of the first clinics run by the Association. I remember with great admiration many of the doctors who provided those clinics in the face of such opposition from both state and church – especially Dr George Henry, Dr Michael Solomons and the late Dr Rory O’Hanlon.

As a medical student I was more easily able than a registered medical practitioner to bring “illegal” items into the Republic and I made many journeys from London to Dublin with IUCDs for the Association’s clinics discreetly packed in my bags and an angelic smile on my face. I was also an enthusiastic member of the first contraceptive train in May 1971, when with much media attention we had a day’s shopping in Belfast for condoms then returned to Connolly Station, where a blushing and embarrassed Customs man looked at his feet as he asked me “Miss have you got any of them fings?”

At the time I was a registrar at the Coombe I also worked in the evening clinics of the IFPA. By then there was less fear of raids and the excellent work of the Association was becoming more widely known among Irish women (and men.)
All this experience has served me in good stead in my practice since leaving Ireland in 1978 (I am Australian by birth.) I worked for three years in Papua-New Guinea where accessible contraceptive services and information are absolutely vital to women’s reproductive health. Back in Australia, I have been closely involved in our successful efforts to allow mifepristone to be available to Australian women. For ten years special legislation prohibited the import and use of the drug in Australia without the personal permission of the Federal Minister for Health, which was never forthcoming. This legislation was passed by the Howard government in 1996 in return for the support of an independent senator in the passage of another piece of legislation that privatised the Australian telephone company – women’s health was not considered in this piece of political manoeuvring! In 2006 I was involved with many others in getting the legislation overturned, and later that year a colleague and I became the first doctors in Australia to use the drug for abortion.

Abortion law in Australia is state law, which originally was written in the 19th century. Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory have completely decriminalised abortion and most other states have liberalised their laws but here in Queensland the antiquated Criminal Code of 1899 still covers abortion. This has recently become an issue with the charging of a young Cairns woman for allegedly procuring her own abortion using mifepristone brought into Australia from overseas. This case, the first of its kind, has yet to come to trial but it is now the focus of our efforts to bring about reform of Queensland abortion laws.

I am a member of Children by Choice, an organisation based in the Queensland capital Brisbane, which has long been an advocate of abortion law reform as well as providing information service to women with unplanned pregnancy.

In 1987, the international arm of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, which normally funds only developing countries, agreed to support two new groups: the Irish Family Planning Association and Children by Choice! So we continue to feel a bond with you in our efforts to improve options for women’s reproductive healthcare. For myself, I will always appreciate the grounding I received in women’s health activism in the days of my training in Dublin.

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