

ABORTION

Campaigning to change the law

Abortion Reform Action Group (ARAG) was set up to get the law on abortion changed. SPEAK asked Chris Diamond who runs ARAG's Johannesburg office why he feels abortion should be legal

Chris Diamond is an unusual man. He believes women should have the right to choose what they do with their own bodies - and he is prepared to do something about it. He operates the Johannesburg office of the Abortion Reform Action Group (ARAG) from his home in Parkhurst on a voluntary basis.

SPEAK asked him what his work involves.

"ARAG tries to pressure the government to change the law on abortion," Diamond says.

"The law should allow women to decide for themselves whether they want an abortion and when," Diamond explains.

"Because abortion is illegal ARAG cannot tell women where they can have abortions. We can only give people free information on how the law on abortion works and when it is possible for a woman to have a legal abortion."

Diamond comes from Britain and has lived in South Africa for 18 years. He

believes South Africa still has a long way to go before changes are made in the law on abortion.

Last year the Ministry of Health did a survey asking women around the country whether they wanted the abortion law changed. ARAG was encouraged and thought the law might change. But the Minister of Health, Dr Rina Venter, said only 50 000 women wanted the law on abortion to change.

Diamond believes the survey did not show women's true views. He says far more than 50 000 South African women have illegal abortions each year.

"Overseas medical records show that each year more than a thousand South African women fly to countries like Britain to have safe and legal abortions because they cannot have them in South Africa. Those who do not have the money to go overseas have to settle for unsafe backstreet abortions. It is estimated that in South Africa more than 200 000 women have illegal abortions each year.

"At Baragwanath Hospital, 4000 women a year are admitted after having abortions.

"We should look at the numbers of women who have illegal abortions and then decide what women want. How can all these women be against changing the law?" says Diamond.

"The laws in this country make it terrible for any women who needs an abortion. Why should any women die from a botched abortion? If the laws were different, having an abortion would be as safe and legal as any other medical procedure, and it will be the woman's personal choice."

Diamond feels government health departments should give free treatment to women who have had illegal, unsafe abortions. The government should also see that all women are given proper information and free contraception if they need it.

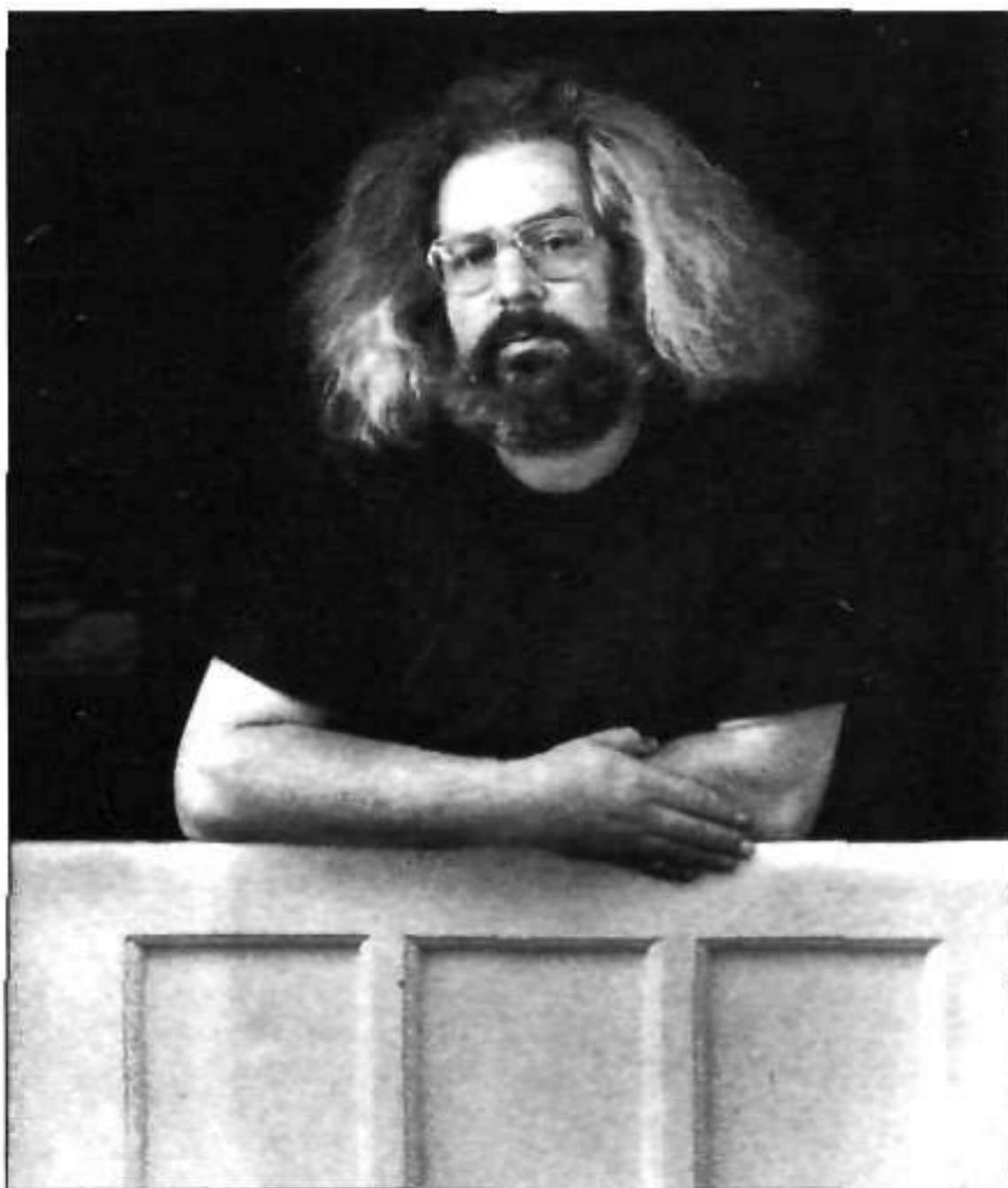


Photo by Anna Zieminski

Chris Diamond - "The people who do not have to have abortions and never will are the ones making laws and decisions about it - like the politicians"

About pro-life groups (groups which are against abortion) Diamond says: "I cannot see people who say "No" to legalising abortion help bring up thousands of unwanted children.

"The people who don't have to have an abortion and never will are the one's making laws and decisions about it," says Diamond, "like the politicians".

"In the end it's a woman's problem and always will be. As part of a group campaigning to have the law changed, I think it's important for women to realise they are not alone." ●

Abortion - what the law says

Abortion is illegal in South Africa. The law says a woman can only have an abortion if:

- her pregnancy threatens her life or her physical and mental health;
- there is a serious risk the baby, once it is born, will suffer from a serious physical or mental disability;
- the pregnancy was a result of rape or incest;
- the pregnant woman is unable to understand fully the responsibility of being a parent. This could also apply to girls under sixteen years of age.

A woman has to go through a long and difficult process to prove she has the legal right to have an abortion.

Because of this, only 4 out of every 10 women who apply for a legal abortion in South Africa get one. Most of these are white women. To contact ARAG in Johannesburg, phone :

(011) 4429540.