

HOPE for the

by **Marika Azzopardi**

Dr Karen Vincenti MD is a busy mum and doctor. With a background covering Public Health, Family Medicine, Infectious Disease and Environmental Health, it is surprising to find her involved in an association such as HOPE. But being one of the founding members of GOL – the Gift of Life foundation – together with her husband Paul Vincenti, makes her an ideal candidate.

“As a group we were always concerned about the importance of education and support in this situation. When several women in crisis pregnancies requested our specific help, HOPE was born in 2006 – as a Crisis Pregnancy Support Service.” Some time later PAIS – Pro-Life Awareness in Schools – was set up as the educational wing of GOL.

HOPE’s role is simple to understand. Whereas GOL lobbies for pro-life action, HOPE supports and offers practical help, education and information to women in distress at a delicate moment. Facing an unexpected pregnancy is not a simple situation.

“I have been actively involved in clinical work at the Infectious Diseases Clinic for a number of years and it is there that I became also concerned with the lifestyle many women lead. Not only do they expose themselves to a high risk of infectious sexually transmitted diseases – but they also risk unplanned pregnancies. I am familiar with talking to people about these risks so when women turn up at HOPE, at some point I often suggest they undergo screening for STDs.”

One of the most stringent concerns in her weekly clinic work revolves around HIV which, Dr Vincenti says,

has taken an alarming upward surge. This intensifies her belief that education has to be directed meaningfully. “In an ideal scenario, crisis situations should be prevented. We have seen the youngest mum to approach HOPE to be in her early teens but women who consult us are not all teenagers – we even get women in their forties. An unexpected pregnancy may come at any moment in a woman’s life whether she is single, married, having relational difficulties, one-night stands, extra-marital affairs.”

Dr Vincenti mentions a phenomenon that has seen Maltese women



Unborn



Dr Karen Vincenti

becoming increasingly involved with foreigners, including considerable numbers of African men. When these women suspect they have become pregnant through an 'illicit' relationship with a dark-skinned person, many times further panic sets in as they may also be concerned about the skin colour of the child.

Advising women in such situations means threading a fine line between being pro-life and being anti-abortion. What is HOPE's stand?

"HOPE is part of a pro-life organisation and we do our best to help both woman and child. Many things may push a woman to the extreme of considering an abortion and I am quite sure that no woman would willingly go for an abortion if she could avoid it, no matter her situation, values, or religious belief. At HOPE we offer a listening ear, information, support and a non-judgemental environment to allow the pregnant woman reach an informed decision away from all the pressures she may be experiencing at the time. Most women who seek our help are relieved to discover that no matter how difficult their circumstances may be there is hope and support free of charge that will make it possible for them to keep their child"



Fear of a new situation, fear of failure to cope, fear of life-changing circumstances – these all add up to the pressure of taking the right decision that will mark a woman's future. Dr Vincenti says that amongst the women who turned up for help at HOPE, there were some who had already experienced an abortion. "Women usually go to the UK or Sicily to abort."

Up until recently Dr. Vincenti served as the first point of contact for women requesting help. The core team, now made up of 12 women, mostly professionals—support the women in crisis according to their specific needs and of course, our limitations. We often refer women to other specialists according to need. "Several gynaecologists and other professionals have also offered their services to our group. We do have an ultrasound machine, which was donated to us, on our premises but this is not used for diagnostic purposes and does not replace the obstetric visit and scans."

Dr Vincenti's role within HOPE is also and ultimately a co-ordinating one. HOPE is regularly offered supplies which could come in handy to women preparing to deal with raising a child. "Our stores are crammed with stuff that

we donate to expectant mums – maternity and baby clothes, prams, cots, sterilizers, breast pumps, playpens, high-chairs – the lot. We usually prepare the baby's layette and the mother's hospital bag with all that is needed and also see how we can help her cope with her new situation. There are other similar support groups working abroad such are LIFE in the UK, Human Life International in the US and Be'Ad Chaim in Israel. We have received much help from these quarters. Ultimately crisis pregnancy is not only a Maltese issue – it is an international one concerning all women." ☐



HOPE welcomes any help with acquiring vitamins, formula milk, nappies, maternity and baby items or anybody wishing to volunteer professional service. Contact weekdays 14.30 – 18.00 or Saturday mornings before 13.00 on 21418055 or email hope@lifemalta.org. Check out www.lifemalta.org