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Abortion of wrong twin rekindles debate

(ANSA) – Rome, August 27 – Debate over Italy's controversial abortion law has been rekindled by a case in which a hospital treating a pregnant woman aborted a healthy foetus while its malformed twin was left untouched.

The incident happened at the San Paolo hospital in Milan earlier this summer but only emerged over the weekend in newspapers, causing an immediate clash between advocates of abortion and Catholic-oriented opponents.

One Catholic lawmaker said the mistake at the San Paolo was made possible by laws which allowed the "selection" of embryos and the subsequent destruction of those considered imperfect.

"I think that after 30 years it's time to look again at the abortion law," said Paola Binetti, a Catholic senator with the government Daisy party and a member of the national bioethics committee.

The Vatican daily, Osservatore Romano, carried a stinging editorial on the case on Monday, attacking not only abortion itself but also the practice of aborting malformed foetuses.

"It is the culture of perfection which forces people to exclude anything which does not appear beautiful, splendid and positive," it said, referring to the Milanese case as a "sea of pain".

"Nobody has the right to suppress another life. Nobody has the right to take the place of God. And yet the innocent continue to die".

Meanwhile, pro-choice MPs expressed horror over the "tragedy" but defended the 1978 law which allows abortions up to 90 days from conception and afterwards if the foetus is malformed.

Health Minister Livia Turco said existing laws were "very wise", marking a point of balance between different viewpoints, and had reduced the number of abortions in Italy over the last 25 years.

Turco, a leftist, said the experience of the Milanese woman who lost both her twins was a case of "very serious human error".

Carlo Flamigni, professor of gynaecology at Bologna University and a pioneer of assisted fertility treatment in Italy, said changing the law after the Milanese incident would be madness.

"It would be like closing down a motorway just because every now and then someone falls asleep while driving along it".

After the mistake at the San Paolo hospital was discovered, the 38-year-old woman reportedly returned to the same hospital and aborted the surviving foetus. She later went to police to report the doctors.

The Milan prosecutor's office has opened a file on the case, although no crime is suspected at present.

Doctors at the hospital have said the two foetuses, one of which was diagnosed as being affected by Down's syndrome, appeared to have changed positions in the mother's womb after the crucial scan.