

Abortion in the United States: The Power of Stigma

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Popular Culture Indications of the Stigma of Abortion

- “Juno”
- “Knocked Up”
- Jamie Lynn Spears’ pregnancy

Medical indications of stigma

- Not routinely taught in all ob/gyn residencies
- Declining number of abortion providers: 1,787, 2005 (vs. 2,380 in 1992)

Origins of Stigma?

- Pre-*Roe* era

“Abortion practices in the pre-*Roe* era created a complex legacy for physicians active after *Roe*, given the enduring images of inept “quacks” and “butchers” and the association with criminality and greed.”

C. Joffe, *Doctors of Conscience: The Struggle to Provide Abortion Before and After Roe v Wade*

Abortion doctor as “technician”

- “For some physicians...legal abortion had the potential to subvert the traditional relationship of physician and patient, rendering the former into a mere “technician” who would do the patient’s bidding.”

Abortion doctor as technician, contd

- “At the 1970 AMA convention—as feminist groups supporting legal abortion picketed outside the convention hall—one doctor complained, ‘Legal abortion makes the patient truly the physician: she makes the diagnosis and establishes the therapy.’”
- From C. Joffe, *Doctors of Conscience*

Where abortions take place

- 1.21 million abortions in US in 2005
- (1.6 million in 1990)
- “Some 87% of U.S. counties, accounting for 35% of women, had no abortion provider in 2005.”
- 94% of abortions take place in freestanding clinics, 5% in hospitals, 2% in doctors’ offices.
- Guttmacher Institute, 2008

Clinics' vulnerability to violence

- Since 1977: seven murders, seventeen attempted murders, 41 bombings, 100 butyric acid attacks (very foul smelling agent), 656 anthrax threats and 175 arsons. Also, aggressive picketing, clinic "blockades", and stalking at homes and churches of providers. NAF.

Has medication abortion (“RU-486”) make a difference in access?

- Mifepristone approved for use in USA in 2000; by 2005--
- “Early medication abortion, offered by an estimated 57% of known providers, accounted for 13% of abortions (and for 22% of abortions before 9 weeks gestation).
- Guttmacher Institute, 2008

Stigmatization by antiabortion activists

- "Newman credits his group's pressure with stopping more than 24 businesses from associating with Tiller. Those include a hotel that no longer puts up his patients during abortions, food delivery places, two cab companies that refuse to take passengers to Tiller's clinic and an oxygen supplier. Contractors now remove their license plate and tape over identifying logos before going onto the clinic grounds, Newman said." (Wichita, Kansas newspaper)

What SC said in Roe v Wade

- “The decision vindicates the right of the physician to administer medical treatment according to his professional judgment up to the points where important state interests provide compelling justifications for intervention. Up to these points, the abortion decision in all its aspects is inherently, and primarily, a medical decision, and basic responsibility for it must rest with the decision.”

The SC Now: Stigmatization of Abortion Providers

- “Congress was concerned...with the effects on the medical community and on its reputation caused by the practice of partial birth [Intact D and E] abortion.”
- “The law need not give abortion doctors unfettered choice in the course of their medical practice, nor should it elevate their status above other physicians in the medical community.” *Gonzales v Carhart, 2007*

Challenges facing new providers

- Ofreceré abortos en el futuro? Es seguro que seguiré ofreciendo el servicio aquí, pero no lo podría hacer si yo estuviera en un estado como Arkansas donde nadie mas ofrece el servicio. Si va a hacer abortos, es necesario que tenga una comunidad."

Challenges, contd

- Cuando la Dra. Ruth Childs regresó a su residencia de la medicina familiar en la Costa Oeste después de entrenarse en cómo hacer los abortos tempranos en la costa este, ella "no sentí segura de con quién podía hablar de mis experiencias. Uno nunca se sabe quiénes son sus aliados en este asunto." Después de recibir varias preguntas de uno de los jefes de la clínica sobre sus comentarios vagas sobre haber cumplido una "rotación del salud de las mujeres" durante su viaje, Childs decidió admitirle todo. "Agradecí mucho oírle decirme que estuvo bien hablar con él sobre eso."

Challenges, contd

- Me acercó y me dijo, "si algún día averiguo que ud. ha realizado un aborto, haré todo lo posible para asegurar que ud. nunca practique la medicina de nuevo en este estado."
(Lori Freedman, *Willing and Unable*. PhD dissertation, Department of Sociology, U.C. Davis, 2008).

But some doctors will provide...

- "Sentía que estaba ayudandoles de una forma muy muy especial. No se trataba de los abortos, sino de ellas y todos sus problemas. Al fin del día, estaba ayudandoles realizar la vida que querían. Una mujer ya tenía tres hijos, ella tenía 30 años y era soltera...ella no sabía que hacer...pero sí sabía que no fue el momento correcto para tener otro hijo. Y a mi me había pasado la misma experiencia." En este momento, Jacobs tomó una pausa, y me contó del momento en su vida cuando ella se encontró ya con dos hijos al punto de divorciarse.

Future of abortion in the U.S.?

- Outcome of 2008 election is crucial
- Various attempts to normalize abortion in U.S. medicine:
 - Fellowship in Family Planning and Abortion
 - Ryan Residency Training Program in Abortion and Family Planning (both at UCSF)