Shock-tactic ads target late-term abortion procedure

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Washington — In an attempt to derail an abortion-rights bill maneuvering toward a congressional showdown, opponents have launched a full-scale campaign against late-term abortions.

The centerpieces of the effort are newspaper advertisements and brochures that graphically illustrate a technique used in some second and third-trimester abortions. A handful of newspapers have run the ads so far, and the National Right to Life Committee has distributed 4 million of the brochures, which were inserted into about a dozen other papers.

By depicting a procedure expected to make most readers squeamish, campaign sponsors hope to convince voters and elected officials that a proposed federal abortion-rights bill is so extreme that states would have no authority to limit abortions — even on potentially viable fetuses.

According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a research group affiliated with Planned Parenthood, about 10% of the estimated 1.6 million abortions done each year are in the second and third trimesters.

Barbara Radford of the National Abortion Federation denounced the ad campaign as disingenuous, saying its "real agenda is to outlaw virtually all abortions, not just late-term ones." But she acknowledged it is having an impact, reporting scores of calls from congressional staffers and others who have seen the ads and brochures and are asking pointed questions about the procedure depicted.

The Minneapolis Star-Tribune ran the ad May 12, on its op-ed page. The anti-abortion group, Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life, paid for it.

In a series of drawings, the ad illustrates a procedure called "dilation and extraction," or D&X, in which forceps are used to remove second and third-trimester fetuses from the uterus intact, with only the head remaining inside the uterus.

The surgeon is then shown jamming scissors into the skull. The ad says this is done to create an opening large enough to insert a catheter that suctions the brain, while at the same time making the skull small enough to pull through the cervix.

"Do these drawings shock you?" the ad reads. "We're sorry, but we think you should know the truth."

The ad quotes Martin Haskell, MD., who described the procedure at a September 1992 abortion-federation meeting, as saying he personally has performed 700 of them. It then states that the proposed "Freedom of Choice Act" now moving through Congress would "protect the practice of abortion at all stages and would lead to an increase in the use of this grisly procedure."

Accuracy Questioned

Some abortion-rights advocates have questioned the ad's accuracy.

A letter to the *Star-Tribune* said the procedure shown "is only performed after fetal death when an autopsy is necessary or to save the life of the mother." And the Morrisville, Vermont *Transcript*, which said in an editorial that it allowed the brochure to be inserted in its paper only because it feared legal action if it refused, quoted the abortion federation as providing similar information. "The fetus is dead 24 hours before the pictured procedure is undertaken," the editorial stated.

"I do have moral compunctions. And if I see a case that's later, like after 20 weeks where it frankly is a child to me, I really agonize over it because the potential is so imminently there. I think, 'Gee, it's too bad that this child couldn't be adopted.'"

But Dr. Haskell and another doctor who routinely use the procedure for late-term abortions told AMNews that the majority of fetuses aborted this way are alive until the end of the procedure.

Dr. Haskell said the drawings were accurate "from a technical point of view." But he took issue with the implication that fetuses were "aware and resisting."

Radford also acknowledged that the information her group was quoted as providing was inaccurate. She has since sent a letter to federation members, outlining guidelines for discussing the matter. Among the points:

— Don't apologize; this is a legal procedure.

— No abortion method is acceptable to abortion opponents.

— The language and graphics in the ads are disturbing to some readers: "Much of the negative reaction, however, is the same reaction that might be invoked if one were to listen to a surgeon describing step-by-step almost any other surgical procedure involving blood, human tissue, etc."

Late-Abortion specialists

Only Dr. Haskell, James T. McMahon, MD of Los Angeles, and a handful of other doctors perform the D&X procedure, which Dr. McMahon refers to as "intact D&E." The more common late-term abortion methods are the classic D&E and induction, which usually involves injecting digoxin or another substance into the fetal heart to kill it, then dilating the cervix and inducing labor.

Dr. Haskell, who owns abortion clinics in Cincinnati and Dayton, said he started performing D&Es for late abortions out of necessity. Local hospitals did not allow inductions past 18 weeks, and he had no place to keep patients overnight while doing the procedure.

But the classic D&E, in which the fetus is broken apart inside the womb, carries the risk of perforation, tearing and hemorrhaging, he said. So he turned to the D&X, which he says is far less risky to the mother.

Dr. McMahon acknowledged that the procedure he, Dr. Haskell and a handful of other doctors use makes some people queasy. But he defends it. "Once you decide the uterus must be emptied, you then have to have 100% allegiance to maternal risk. There's no justification to doing a more dangerous procedure because somehow this doesn't offend your sensibilities as much."

Brochure cites N.Y. case

The four-page anti-abortion brochures also include a graphic depiction of the D&X procedure. But the cover features a photograph of 16-month-old Ana Rosa Rodriquez, whose right arm was severed during an abortion attempt when her mother was 7 months pregnant.

The child was born two days later, at 32 to 34 weeks' gestation. Abu Hayat, MD of New York, was convicted of assault and performing an illegal abortion. He was sentenced to up to 29 years in prison for this and another related offense.

New York law bans abortions after 24 weeks, except to save the mother's life. The brochure states that Dr. Hayat never would have been prosecuted if the federal "Freedom of Choice Act" were in effect, because the act would invalidate the New York statute.

The proposed law would allow abortion for any reason until viability. But it would leave it up to individual practitioners — not the state — to define that point. Post viability abortions, however, could not be restricted if done to save a woman's life or health, including emotional health.

The abortion federation's Radford called the Hayat case "an aberration" and stressed that the vast majority of abortions occur within the first trimester. She also said that later abortions usually are done for reasons of fetal abnormality or maternal health.

But Douglas Johnson of the National Right to Life Committee called that suggestion "blatantly false.

The abortion practitioners themselves will admit the majority of their late-term abortions are elective," he said. "People like Dr. Haskell are just trying to teach others how to do it more efficiently."

Numbers Game

Accurate figures on second and third-trimester abortions are elusive because a number of states don't require doctors to report abortion statistics. For example, one-third of all abortions are said to occur in California, but the state has no reporting requirements. The Guttmacher Institute estimates there were nearly 168,000 second and third-trimester abortions in 1988, the last year for which figures are available.

About 60,000 of those occurred in the 16 to 20 week period, with 10,660 at week 21 and beyond, the institute says. Estimates were based on actual gestational age as opposed to last menstrual period.

There is particular debate over the number of third-trimester abortions. Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, MD, estimated in 1984 that 4,000 are performed annually. The abortion federation puts the number at 300 to 500. Dr. Haskell says that "probably Koop's numbers are more correct."

Dr. Haskell said he performs abortions "up until about 25 weeks" gestation, most of them elective. Dr. McMahon does abortions through all 40 weeks of pregnancy, but said he won't do an elective procedure after

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THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
AT
CHAPEL HILL

April 27, 1993

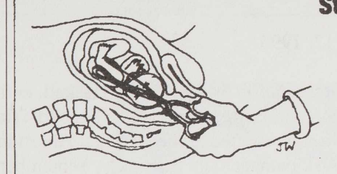
I have reviewed the article entitled "Dilation and Extraction for Late Second Trimester Abortion" by Martin Haskell, MD. (presented at the National Abortion Federation Risk Management Seminar, September 13, 1992). The illustrations adapted from drawings appearing in the February 1993 issue of *Life Advocate* enclosed in your letter of April 19, 1993, is an accurate representation of the procedure described in the article by Dr. Haskell.

Sincerely yours,

Watson A. Bowes Jr., M.D.
Professor

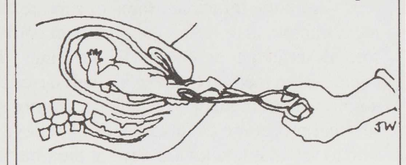
Anatomy of a D&X killing

Step 1



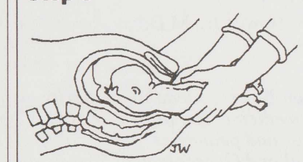
The abortionist grasps one of the baby's legs with forceps.

Step 2



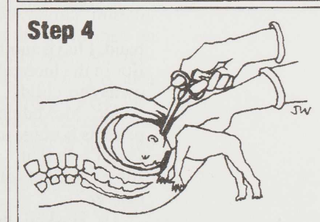
The leg is pulled into the birth canal.

Step 3



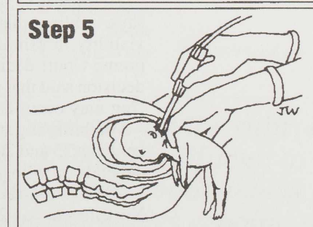
Using his hands, the abortionist delivers the baby's body. The head remains inside.

Step 4



The abortionist forces scissors into the base of the baby's skull. He then opens the scissors to enlarge the hole.

Step 5



A suction catheter is inserted into the wound, and the baby's brains are sucked out. The child is then removed.