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An Abortion Doctor's View

By [KATE ZERNIKE](#) JAN. 20, 2003

From a small television screen in the waiting room of the Midwest Medical Center, **Dr. Dennis D. Christensen** comes off as a cross between a high school biology teacher and a police officer reading the Miranda warnings for the ten-thousandth time.

His eyes never meet the camera as he recites how an abortion is performed, its dangers and the alternatives, like adoption. He offers, as the state requires, that a woman may listen to the heartbeat of her fetus and see it on ultrasound if she likes, that she may withdraw consent up to the moment the abortion is induced, that she has the legal right to continue her pregnancy.

Finally, he looks into the camera and jauntily declares, "This message is brought to you compliments of your anti-abortion, Republican State Legislature."

"That usually gets a smile," he said, watching himself on the videotape.

Dr. Christensen, 60, did his first abortion in 1973, the year *Roe v. Wade* was decided, and has been doing them here, in a state that abortion-rights advocates consider one of the most restrictive, for 25 years. He has seen changes, and, like doctors elsewhere, made his way around them.

Wisconsin requires girls under 18 to get a parent's consent, and a 24-hour waiting period between counseling and an abortion. It also requires what is known as informed consent, which is what brought Dr. Christensen to the little screen. Consent here means that women must be given a 26-page color booklet that shows the development of the fetus at two-week intervals.

Doctors also are required to read each woman a list of risks and alternatives to abortion, written by the state, with the woman checking off each point on a double-sided form to indicate she understands it. The presentation takes about 20 minutes. Dr. Christensen says it was meant to be slow, to reduce the number of patients a doctor could see in a day. With five clinics statewide -- he does 3,000 abortions a year -- efficiency is everything.

He said he decided to put it on videotape so he could see patients while others viewed his lecture. And, he made a few of what he said he felt were corrections. While the state form says "unborn child," he says "the developing pregnancy." To the risks of abortion, he adds that statistically, women are more likely to have complications in pregnancy and childbirth.

"This is all basically harassment," he said.

Still, Dr. Christensen seems upbeat about the status of abortion. The waiting period, he said, has made women less nervous on the day of the procedure. Women who did not want to wait have gone to Iowa and Illinois.

He said 10 percent of the women who come in for counseling do not return for an abortion.

"I don't think any woman in the state of Wisconsin who wants an abortion will go without one," he said. "She just might have to jump through a few more hoops than some of us might like."