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On Abortion-Clinic Rounds: Forceps and Bulletproof Vest

By SARA RIMER,

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MILWAUKEE, Aug. 28— It was 7:45 A.M., and still cool, but as Dr. Bernard Smith drove his Jeep to his abortion clinic, he was sweating. It was his bulletproof vest that was making him hot.

Dr. Smith has been performing abortions for more than 10 years, much of the time driving a weekly 600-mile circuit of abortion clinics in three states. As fewer and fewer abortion doctors are willing to put up with the harassment and tension in their own communities, such circuit riders have become far more common.

Among the things Dr. Smith knows about his business is that violence against doctors has been on the rise. He got the bulletproof vest six months ago, after an abortion doctor was fatally shot outside a clinic in Pensacola, Fla. Another doctor was shot and wounded two weeks ago in Wichita, Kan.

As Dr. Smith approached the Affiliated Medical Services clinic on Milwaukee's east side, 30 anti-abortion protesters were waiting with picket signs and pictures of bloody fetuses, as they are every Saturday. The tall, broad-shouldered doctor showed no tension or anxiety.

"It's always the same," he said. "They tell me: 'Bernie, don't do any killing today. Shame on you. Repent.' I just agree and keep walking. I used to try and talk to them, but I just don't feel up to it anymore. It's at an impasse. There's no common ground."

Dr. Smith, who put himself through Northwestern Medical School 20 years ago by working nights as a mail carrier and is on the board of the National Abortion Federation, describes himself as a passionate defender of a woman's right to have an abortion. Cheers for Landmark Ruling

"I remember being in a lecture in medical school when they announced that Roe v. Wade had passed," he said of the landmark Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion in 1973. "We all cheered. I've had to question my motives. Do I really want to do this in the face of all this adversity? Am I willing to risk this whatever the consequences? The answer is yes."

It is not only his bulletproof vest that protects the 49-year-old doctor; it is his cloak of professionalism. To him, abortion is simply not a moral issue. "I know exactly what I'm doing and why I'm doing it," he said. "I'm providing a medical service. I do it out of a sense of duty, just the way other doctors do theirs, only mine happens to be in a controversial field."

And if he did not do his duty, he said, the clinic in Milwaukee, one of five in the city, might close its doors. Dr. Smith is the only doctor in the area who performs abortions as late as 20 weeks into a pregnancy. The next closest doctor who does that works out of a clinic in Madison, 90 miles away. Most doctors stop performing abortions after the first 12 weeks, after which the danger to the woman increases.

Anti-abortion protesters have picketed Dr. Smith's home, surrounded his car, distributed "wanted" posters with his picture branding him a "child killer," blockaded the clinics where he works and mailed him anonymous death threats.

"Those are techniques of shame and embarrassment, and I am not ashamed of what I do," Dr. Smith said. "I'm not proud of it, either. It would be nice if what I do wasn't really needed. That would be O.K. by me. People think I don't like kids. But I have four kids, and an 8-month-old grandchild."

The director of the clinic, Victoria Sprinkman, worries for Dr. Smith. She is the one who insisted that he get a bulletproof vest.

"He's either not scared, or he's covering it up better than anyone I've seen in my life," she said. Slaying in Florida

Dr. David Gunn, who was killed in Pensacola, had received numerous death threats and carried three guns in his car for protection. Dr. Smith says he will not get a gun, though lately he has been varying his route, and checking his rear view mirror more than he used to.

He spends a lot of time behind the wheel of his Jeep: he makes a 600-mile, six-day, weekly circuit from a clinic in Niles, Mich., to one in Peoria, Ill., to Milwaukee. With fewer and fewer young doctors being trained in abortion, even as older doctors are reaching retirement, Dr. Smith's is not an uncommon journey. Dr. Gunn used to put in 1,000 miles a week, covering clinics in Alabama, Georgia and Florida. Some doctors have become pilots so they can fly their own planes from state to state. Others have stopped providing abortions because of the harassment.

Dr. Smith says he considers himself fortunate to have the support of volunteers from the Milwaukee Clinic Protection Coalition, a local volunteer group. "I'm not out there alone," he said. "That means a lot to me."

The volunteers were there when he pulled into the parking lot at the clinic here. They escorted him past the line of protesters, and through the locked door, with a sign above: "This clinic stays open."

Inside, the doctor took off his bulletproof vest and put on his blue scrubs. Every year 1.3 million abortions are performed in the United States. Today 23 women, ranging in age from 16 to 35, were waiting for the doctor. They were black, white, Hispanic and Asian, married and unmarried, employed and unemployed.

Dr. Smith, who will soon be divorced, says he regularly visits his children: three grown daughters and a teen-age son. When his children were small, he said: "I told them, 'Your daddy does abortions. That means he interrupts pregnancies. Some people are going to say your daddy is a baby killer. I don't see it that way.'"

He said that his oldest patient was a 54-year-old who never dreamed she could get pregnant, and that his youngest was an 11-year-old victim of incest. "How is an 11-year-old going to raise a child?" he asked. "What was she in -- fifth grade? How could she possibly understand what was happening to her?"

To the protesters outside, though, there can be no exceptions. Asked about the 11-year-old incest victim, one of them, a fundamentalist Christian named Karen Schneider, said: "That baby is created by God. I believe there should be no compromises. A life is a life."

Among Dr. Smith's patients on this day was a waitress with four children, who said she could not afford another. There was a mother of five on public assistance who had worked as a prostitute and been shot and stabbed, according to her records.

Another, a 30-year-old mother, is rearing a daughter alone, working as an administrative assistant and dreaming of one day going back to college. "My job is very demanding," she said. "It would be in jeopardy if I had another child. I could end up on welfare. I've been crying for weeks. This is not something I want to do."

Mrs. Schneider, 39, the protester, who has three sons, acknowledges having had four abortions more than 10 years ago before she married. "I listened to the feminist viewpoint that it is better for us to have control over our bodies than to bring children into the world," she said, clutching her Bible. "The first one was at age 24. I have to admit I wanted that abortion. I was in graduate school. I did not want to be saddled with that child."

Dr. Smith is familiar with Mrs. Schneider's story. "Why can't other women have four chances and then repent?" he said. "Why can't other women have a chance to make mistakes?" Too Poor to Dream

Dr. Smith, who is black, was one of 11 children who grew up in Mississippi and Chicago with a mother who scrubbed white people's floors. "I knew about the color thing growing up," he said. "But I didn't find out about the man-woman thing until I got older. Women can work anywhere

they want to now. They can't harass you in the workplace anymore. What else can they do? They can harass you in the moral arena."

He was the first person in his family to graduate from college. He went to work as a high school mathematics and science teacher on the South Side of Chicago. "We were too poor for me to even dream about becoming a doctor," he said. But at the age of 25, under a minority recruitment program, he started medical school.

He began his career in emergency medicine at Methodist Hospital in Gary, Ind. He had no intention of doing abortions, he said. But in 1979, the director of a local Planned Parenthood chapter said his clinic needed a doctor. After long reflection, Dr. Smith said, he decided to help.

On this day, one of his last patients was a 17-year-old girl with a pearl heart necklace over her sweatshirt and braces on her teeth. Her father and her boyfriend, who is also 17, sat with her in the waiting room. In five days she would start her senior year of high school. She is a dancer on the pompon squad. She had a job at a fast food restaurant. She was nine weeks pregnant.

"I'm sad," she said, with her hands scrunched inside the sleeves of her sweatshirt. "I don't want to do this, and I do want to do this. My best friend said it's my fault. I shouldn't have had sex. She wants me to give the baby up for adoption. I don't want the baby to die because it's not his fault. But I don't want to mess up my life, either. I want to go to college.

"My dad says he doesn't want me to end up like him. I was an unwanted baby. My mother had three abortions before me. My dad wanted her to have another one. They got divorced over it." Her father, who was not present while she spoke to a reporter, said later that everything she had said was true.

The girl's mother was 16 when she was born; her father was 19.

The price of her abortion was \$260 with local anesthesia, \$320 with a stronger medication, called "twilight." Her father ordered the local. The girl said she would leave if he did not pay for the twilight. She got the twilight. Her boyfriend held her hand during the three-minute operation.

Afterward, Dr. Smith checked the tissue with forceps to make sure he had gotten everything. With forceps, he indicated the embryo. It was an inch long.

"This is what everybody's fighting about," he said. "It has a beating heart." It had no skeletal structure, only buds for limbs.

After performing thousands of abortions, Dr. Smith added, he looked upon the embryo much as another doctor might view an appendix he had just removed. "To me, I'm playing the same role at 8 weeks or at 12," he said. "The decision that was made by the woman is paramount. It's the woman's choice."

He placed the the embryo and other tissue in a sealed plastic bag with preservatives. It would be sent to a secret location for incineration.

It was after 5 P.M. when Dr. Smith got back in his Jeep and started on the two-hour drive home, to Chicago. His children live there. Sunday was his day off.

By 6:45 A.M. Monday he was back at the wheel, heading out of downtown toward Niles, Mich., two hours away. Thirty-four abortions were scheduled. The youngest patient would be a 13-year-old girl. Often, women drive five and six hours from upstate Michigan to the Niles clinic.

"There's a clinic about three minutes from my apartment in Chicago that would hire me in a minute," Dr. Smith said. "But they've already got doctors. The other clinics would close if I left. And the staff in Milwaukee said they'd shoot me if I did."

Photo: Before Dr. Bernard Smith can begin his work at the abortion clinic in Milwaukee where he has worked for more than 10 years, he must remove the bulletproof vest that has become a necessary part of his attire. (Steve Regan for The New York Times) (pg. A12) Map of Wisconsin and Michigan. (pg. A12)