

OF NEWS IN THE SUNSHINE STATE

Doctor under scrutiny quits abortion clinic in Pensacola

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TALLAHASSEE — A doctor performing abortions at a controversial Pensacola clinic has quit after questions about his medical record came to light.

The Florida Board of Medicine said Tuesday that Dr. Steven Chase Brigham, the target of more than a dozen medical complaints in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York, is no longer practicing in Florida.

News of Brigham's decision came as anti-abortion groups urged the state to yank his license.

Brigham took over for Dr. John Britton at the Ladies Center in Pensacola after Britton was killed July 29 in the clinic's parking lot by shotgun-wielding abortion protester Paul Hill.

Citing secrecy laws, officials of the state medical board would not say whether Florida is investigating Brigham. It was not known whether the Pensacola clinic has found another doctor. Clinic officials would not return calls.

Brigham has lost his license or voluntarily given it up in the Northeastern states.

If Brigham "did an abortion in New York, New Jersey or Pennsylvania, he would be arrested by police. In Florida, he gets a police escort to his patients," Vicky Conroy, spokeswoman for Pensacola-based Legal Action for Women, said at a news conference in Tallahassee.

"There ought to be as much outcry when a woman dies in a

botched abortion as when an abortion doctor is killed. Women going into a clinic ought to know the reputation of these doctors," Conroy said.

With the Florida Legislature under pressure to take up abortion clinic regulation, both anti-abortion and abortion-rights forces are taking the offensive.

While anti-abortion leaders were in Tallahassee attacking Brigham and calling for the state to protect women from dangerous clinic doctors, an abortion-rights group in Washington was denouncing the rise in violence and death threats against people working in Florida clinics and more than 375 others across the nation.

Though there are fewer anti-abortion protests these days, violence and death threats were up substantially during the first seven months of 1994, compared with the same period in 1993, according to a report released Tuesday by the Feminist Majority Foundation.

More than half the clinics have reported acts of violence ranging from vandalism to death threats and shootings.

"I can believe that," said Tammy Sobieski-Joy who runs abortion clinics in Orlando and Daytona Beach. Her Orlando clinic received bomb threats.

Doctors at the Daytona Beach clinic were among 13 to receive identical letters saying that they and their co-workers would soon be killed. In Melbourne, clinic owner Patricia Baird Windle fled town last summer after a two vicious death threats against her and her family.

"The degree of violence, the depth of the hatred we are seeing is alarming," said Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority. "They are going to the 'homicide strategy,' and they have to be taken seriously."

Clinic vandalism is down nationwide, Smeal said. But vandalism is up in Florida, said Sobieski-Joy, president of the Florida Abortion Council.

Brigham had been performing abortions at the Ladies Center in Pensacola, a city prone to clinic violence.

Brigham has been accused of 14 counts of medical misconduct in two states. He last week agreed to stop practicing medicine in New Jersey. He had his medical license revoked in New York four weeks ago, and before that, he had agreed to stop practicing medicine in Pennsylvania.

"The charges are unfair and unfounded ... [but] I see light at the end of the tunnel," Brigham said after he agreed to suspend his practice in New Jersey pending a hearing. "At least I get the opportunity to defend myself. That's the most important thing."

Calls to Brigham and his attorney were not returned Tuesday.

Brigham earned a Florida medical license in 1988, passed a rigorous investigation and had no blemishes on his record at that time, said Dr. Marm Harris, executive director of the Board of Medicine. He renewed that license in March.

Herald researcher Becky Donald and The Associated Press contributed to this report.