

NEW JERSEY

Controversial abortion doctor agrees not to practice in N.J.

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TRENTON — A controversial abortion doctor has agreed to stop working in New Jersey until an administrative law judge decides whether he's fit to practice medicine.

Dr. Steven Chase Brigham's offer was accepted Wednesday by the New Jersey State Board of Medical Examiners after the board deliberated about one hour.

Brigham said he will now get the chance to clear his name of charges of gross negligence and incompetence brought by the state of New Jersey.

"At least I get the opportunity to defend myself. That's the most important thing," Brigham said following the board's decision. "It's been an ordeal. The charges are unfair and unfounded ... (but) I see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Anti-abortion activists said they were satisfied for now.

"We are pleased Steven Brigham surrendered his license, and we are confident that the administrative law judge and the Board of Medical Examiners will ultimately act in the best interest of women in the state and permanently revoke his license," said Marie Tasy, spokeswoman for New Jersey Right to Life.

Brigham had his medical license revoked in New York three weeks ago, and prior to that he had agreed to stop practicing medicine in Pennsylvania.

In October, an administrative law judge began hearings to determine if Brigham's license to practice in New Jersey should be revoked or suspended. That matter is ongoing, but the state on

Wednesday asked New Jersey's medical board to immediately revoke or suspend Brigham's license in light of the New York action.

Brigham offered to temporarily suspend his New Jersey practice pending a decision by the administrative law judge, and the board decided to accept his offer.

The matter before the administrative law judge has been adjourned until Jan. 24.

Brigham is charged with 14 counts of negligence, gross negligence, malpractice, and professional misconduct concerning five abortions performed in New Jersey and New York. Most of the cases involved complications arising during second-trimester abortions.

New York last month revoked Brigham's privileges to practice there, citing two of the five abortions brought before the court in New Jersey.

Deputy Attorney General Linda Ershaw-Levenberg on Wednesday argued that New Jersey should revoke or suspend Brigham's license because New York determined he engaged in "gross and repeated actions of negligence regarding two patients."

One case involved a New Jersey woman identified only as M.B. who sought an abortion at Brigham's Spring Valley, N.Y., office in November 1993. She was 26 weeks pregnant.

New Jersey alleges that while Brigham was performing the procedure, M.B. suffered cervical lacerations, and that Brigham did not make sure the cuts were properly sewn up.

The patient began hemor-

rhaging but, as New Jersey alleges and New York found in revoking Brigham's license, it was hours before Brigham called an ambulance to rush her to a hospital where she had to have a hysterectomy.

In a second case, Brigham was found by New York to have unknowingly perforated the uterus of a woman, identified as A.W., who was 24½ weeks pregnant.

Ershaw-Levenberg urged the board to accept New York's decision and take disciplinary action against Brigham.

Brigham pleaded with the board to have the opportunity to defend himself against all the charges. He said if the board revoked his license on the basis of the two cases cited by New York, the remaining 12 charges brought against him in New Jersey would forever hang over his head.

"Am I ever going to be allowed to defend myself?" Brigham asked. "My name has gone across the country. My grandmother in Atlanta who didn't even know I did abortions reads in the paper about the New Jersey allegations. ... This will haunt me the rest of my life. I just want to exonerate myself to my family and the world."

With the action by the board, Brigham can now only practice in the states of California and Florida.

In Florida, Brigham took over for Dr. John Britton at the Ladies Center in Pensacola, Fla., after Britton was shot and killed outside the clinic.

Paul Hill, a former minister, has been convicted and sentenced to die for killing Britton and his unarmed escort.