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ANTI-ABORTION PROTEST TARGETS ABSECON CLINIC

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Dr. Stuart Sackstein's private gynecology practice became the group's focus after Alternatives in Atlantic City was closed by the state June 22.

Anti-abortion protesters greeted a handful of patients and several employees of Dr. Stuart Sackstein on Saturday with prayers and pamphlets, vowing to return every day the doctor performs abortions at his private medical office in the Courtyard, a professional office campus along the White Horse Pike.

Standing abreast on the parking lot of a nearby real estate office adjoining the the wooded office park, nine Catholic laymembers, many clasping rosaries, repeatedly recited the "Hail Mary" prayer.

At the entrance to the Courtyard, two men with signs reading "Abortion Kills Children" stood in the morning drizzle, attempting to engage anyone who drove in, handing them a pamphlet counseling options to abortions.

Absecon police, called by Sackstein's office early Saturday morning because the group initially was on the Courtyard's property, asked the group to stay back from the medical office. Police allowed them to stand on the property of the neighboring closed real estate business.

Patients leaving Sackstein's office ignored the group, who shouted, "We're praying for you," or alternatively, "Jesus loves you. We love you."

Most of the group broke up shortly after being interviewed, after protesting for about two hours.

But they vowed to return any day they believe Sackstein is performing abortions, according to their leader, Peter Marsico of Egg Harbor Township.

He said they hope to change the minds of some potential patients or provide comfort to others who have abortions.

Sackstein's private gynecology practice became the group's focus as an indirect result of the state's June 22 closing of Alternatives, an abortion clinic that operated for years at 1616 Pacific Ave. in Atlantic City.

The state, following an investigation by The Press of Atlantic City, now admits it has for years failed to inspect five of the state's six licensed abortion clinics.

Alternatives, which remains closed, was cited then for violations of "immediate and serious" health hazards. Sackstein, who is 55-years-old, not 61 as previously reported, was the medical director of Alternatives at the time the state ordered the clinic closed. He resigned from that position the day after the state shut the clinic.

As a consequence, the anti-abortionists have shifted their focus from Alternatives to Sackstein, who recently advertised he was performing abortions in his private office in Absecon.

Constituents' calls following Sackstein's advertisement and a follow-up story in The Press led Absecon City Council President Lynn Catterson, a lawyer, to ask city employees last week to investigate Sackstein's medical practice. Courtney Wicks, executive director of the National Abortion Rights Action League's New Jersey office, responded by labeling Catterson's order a "witch hunt."

Other than land-use issues, New Jersey municipalities have no authority over physicians' offices.

Catterson said she expects that the city will discuss Sackstein's office at Thursday's council meeting and she defended ordering a review.

"In my opinion, any citizen that calls City Hall about any matter, no matter how trivial it may appear to others or significant ... deserves an answer." If an official "doesn't know the answer, they should look into it to answer it," she added.

Anna Niedelman, a former administrator of Alternatives who left the clinic long before its recent problems with the state, is now working with Sackstein at his Absecon office.

She, too, worried about the message Catterson's order sends.

"We're a private physician's office operating perfectly legally. Abortions can be performed in private offices up to 14 weeks. I don't think we should be singled out for any kind of investigation because we provide a needed service," she said.

Niedelman said Sackstein has served women's health needs since 1983.

"In doing so, he has taken care of women in all facets of their health care, including OB-GYN, infertility, pregnancy termination, contraceptive counseling and every other aspect of women's health care," she said. "pregnancy terminations have always been an essential elective service."

She said Sackstein is filling a void caused by Alternatives' closing.

A former patient of Sackstein's during several visits years ago, Jacqueline Long, a Galloway Township resident and Pleasantville school crossing guard, was among the protesters -- and the last to leave her vigil.

A veteran of Alternatives protests, she said she left Sackstein's medical practice after he offered her birth control medication. Later, she also discovered he offered abortions.

"I'm here to pray for the babies," she said in a halting whisper as her fellow protesters returned to their cars while a light rain continued to fall.

She and other members of the group plan to be back Thursday morning, when abortions are next offered at Sackstein's office.