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Both sides unhappy on abortion clinic rules

Key word is safety for proposed changes

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MONTGOMERY — Pro-life forces said Monday that stricter proposed changes in state abortion clinic regulations do not go far enough and said they want to outlaw abortion in the state altogether.

Pro-choice advocates said some of the proposed changes in Department of Public Health regulations may result in fewer abortion clinics and a return to dangerous back-alley abortions of a forgotten era.

Public health regulators at a public hearing Monday said their move to clarify abortion-clinic operating procedures comes because of problems that led to closing two facilities earlier this year. They predict more changes, including possible legislation in 2007.

The key word in arguments for both sides is safety, but the sides differ on what the word includes.

Pro-choice advocates said proposed regulations will likely

result in fewer abortion clinics operating in the state and a smaller number of doctors with the credentials needed to oversee their operations.

Choice advocates said they want public health to reconsider proposals requiring each abortion clinic to have a doctor on staff or through contract who is board certified in obstetrics and gynecology and with admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles of the clinic.

They also argue that the proposed changes put stricter restrictions on abortion clinics than on any other freestanding clinics in the state, including surgery centers.

The Rev. Jack Zylman, a retired Unitarian minister and a member of Alabama Clergy for Choice, spoke against the proposed changes.

"Abortion clinics are there because hospitals have knuckled under to the anti-abortion forces," Zylman said.

He said when hospitals declined to do abortions, the move left women with no choice except the nine for-profit clinics operating across the state.

"We do not need to return to a situation of the 1960s with dangerous back-alley abortions," Zylman said.

Planned Parenthood of Alabama President Larry Rodick said the issues of hospital-admitting privileges is "a sticking point that may be hard to meet."

Many doctors are reluctant to enter into agreements that make their identity known publicly because of harassment threats and physical danger, he added.

Rodick said it is not unusual for people with medical problems to go to an emergency room at their doctor's direction and then be referred to a specialist, something that is a sticking point for proponents of stricter regulations for the clinics.

A reproductive health doctor who does abortions in Alabama and Georgia questioned the proposal to require that an obstetrician/gynecologist oversee abortion clinic operations.

A family practice physician with additional training in reproductive health, Dr. Tamer Middleton said many doctors who specialize in obstetrics and gynecology have no training in abortion procedures because medical schools often do not offer the training.

Dr. Middleton said many family practice doctors deliver babies and many have added training in reproductive health.

"The question should be how to do this and how to do it well," she said.

She predicts that more women will end up with complications in hospital emergency rooms.

Abortion foes argued that the clinics are unsafe and operate with many violations, something that one abortion clinic operator said is not true of all facilities.

Groups pushing for stricter regulations included Alabama Physicians for Life, Operation Rescue, Christian Action Alabama and Rep. Jack Williams, R-Birmingham.

No health provider

Dr. Matt Phillips, a Montgomery obstetrician/gynecologist said current practices in the capital city sometimes leave women who had abortions without a health provider.

"There is a moral concern when the patient is abandoned," said Dr. Phillips.

He wants regulations that require abortion clinics to have a doctor available to talk to hospital physicians if a patient goes to the emergency room. In some recent instances, Dr. Phillips said, a clinic would not release the doctor's name.

While Dr. Phillips said he is pro-life, he said he treats patients with medical emergencies after abortion and does not know of a doctor in the city who does not.

More accountability

But he wants more accountability in the industry.

Rick Harris, director of the Bureau of Health Provider

Standards for the health department, said the proposed regulations came after violations shut down two abortion clinics in the state in recent months. Harris said the department will probably look at additional changes in months ahead, including the issue of qualifications for physicians at the clinics.

Comments

Public health will take written public comments on the proposed regulation changes through Dec. 5. Mail comments to: John Wible, P.O. Box 303017, Montgomery, AL 36130-3017.

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