**Handful of Abortion Clinics Put Poor at Risk**

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In an era when abortion is widely considered safe, thousands of Southern California women--primarily low-income, often Latina--are obtaining abortions from a handful of high-volume doctors who have repeatedly run into trouble with the state licensing board and in some cases run afoul of the law.

In scattered offices and storefront clinics throughout the region, these doctors quietly perform a procedure--sometimes late in the pregnancy--that many other physicians shun. Their patients tend to be desperate for help and disinclined to complain.

In the past five years, three doctors and a clinic manager in Southern California have been charged with felonies in connection with illegal or botched abortions. In three of the cases, patients died. The doctors--some of whom provide 100 abortions a week or more, according to state records--all had long medical board records.

Officials concede that the small number of cases in which charges are brought represent only the most egregious problems and reflect the difficulty in policing the clinics.

For the Record  
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Abortions--A story in Sunday's Times reported that Dr. Bruce Steir had "cut into" the bowel of a patient who died of a perforated uterus after an abortion. The autopsy report indicates that the patient's bowel showed evidence of surface hemorrhaging but was not punctured.

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The cases also dramatically illustrate the challenges poor women, particularly in immigrant communities, face in obtaining quality health care.

Although the public is largely unaware of what may go on inside these clinics, the potential for trouble is well known to some physicians and patient advocates.

"We call them chop shops," said Dr. Jorge Carreon, a longtime South Gate obstetrician and gynecologist. "They are legal, but they are practicing medicine that is below the standard of care."

Problem Doctors Difficult to Catch

Monitoring and disciplining errant doctors is complicated by abortion politics. Anti-abortion forces condemn what they call "abortion mills," while abortion rights advocates blame opponents for marginalizing a legal procedure they believe should be widely available.

For years, a problem provider's work may go largely unnoticed, except by women who accept discount leaflets on the streets or anti-abortion activists who painstakingly track the clinics' performance and protest at their doors. Sometimes, a single incident--a patient death, a near death or the provider's arrest--turns a harsh light on their history.

Dr. Gordon Goei had toiled for years in clinics throughout the region before making news late last month when authorities were called to a Northridge hospital where his 42-year-old patient was bleeding profusely. They found her 26-week-old fetus in a trash bag inside a Van Nuys clinic.

Goei, 55, was practicing despite a suspended medical license. He has been charged with performing an illegal abortion and is out on bail.

Trent Copeland, Goei's attorney, said his client didn't know he was practicing illegally because he never received notice that his license was suspended.

"I think he's found himself on the wrong side of the political question and has faced unfair attention," Copeland said. "The tragic irony is, this is a man who has spent his life providing medical services to low-income people."

But Goei was no stranger to the medical board; he had a 99-page file detailing disciplinary actions dating to 1979, when he was first placed on probation. He was disciplined again in 1984, in 1992, and in 1997--the most recent time for mishandling cases of eight obstetrical (non-abortion) patients.

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Six days before he performed the abortion that led to his arrest, his license was suspended because he failed a competency exam required under probation, according to medical board records.

In other cases:

\* Dr. Bruce Steir, 68, formerly one of the most active abortion providers in Northern California, faces second-degree murder charges in the 1996 death of a 27-year-old African American woman at a Moreno Valley clinic. Authorities say that Steir mistakenly cut into Sharon Hamptlon's bowel, then, despite realizing his error, left to catch a plane without referring her to a hospital.

Steir has since retired. His attorney, Mark Merin, said Steir did not know he had perforated Hamptlon's uterus and would never have left if he had.

Hamptlon was a fast-food restaurant worker on Medi-Cal who had been 20 weeks pregnant. She slipped into unconsciousness in her mother's car on the way home to Barstow, after telling her 3-year-old son she loved him, her mother, Doris, said. She bled to death.

Steir was on probation with the medical board at the time, practicing without oversight from a required proctor, according to court papers. He had been accused before of failing to refer injured abortion patients to hospitals, medical board records show, and he had been stripped of clinical privileges in the Navy.

\* Dr. Suresh Gandotra was accused by state licensing authorities in 1995 of botching a late-term abortion that killed a 23-year-old Mexican woman who traveled from Tijuana to his San Ysidro clinic.

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