

## Creating tomorrow's abortion providers at UC and Stanford

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Dr. Merrie Warden in San Francisco, California on Friday,... (Jim Gensheimer, Mercury News)

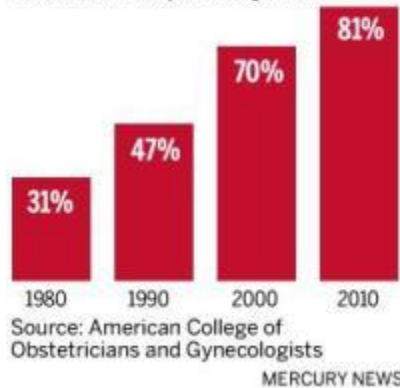
This is the face of the new foot soldier in the battle to maintain access to abortion: the girl next door.

Graduating in record numbers from medical schools, young women are increasing the ranks of tomorrow's abortion providers, bringing the procedure out of the margins and into mainstream medicine -- and securing its place within academia's safe and supportive structure. UC San Francisco and Stanford are among the universities leading the way.

Their efforts come at a time when the procedure is once again the center of emotionally charged debates. Both state legislatures and the U.S. House of Representatives are considering limits on access.

## Ob-gyn residents

The share of all ob-gyn residents who are women has more than doubled in the past 30 years.



"It is not at all a radical mission. It's really simple," said Dr. Merrie Warden, 33, a Kansas native with blue eyes and stellar academics, who came to UCSF because of its leadership in family planning education. "Abortion is part of women's reproductive health care, so it should be part of our training."

"You can't really argue with that -- although people do," she said, her voice tightening.

Plummet in providers

Almost four decades after *Roe vs. Wade* legalized abortion, one of the big obstacles is access to a trained doctor. One-quarter of California counties and 87 percent of U.S. counties have no known provider.

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For years, mainstream medicine largely distanced itself from abortion care. Doctors outsourced the procedure to clinics. Few med schools offered it as part of their curriculums. There were no fellowships, special training programs or national conferences.

Now only 2 percent of ob-gyns perform half of all abortions. Many are approaching retirement. Others are weary of stigma, threats and violence. The number of providers has declined by 37 percent since 1982.

In response, young doctors are being educated or trained through three new programs, all conceived at UCSF: Medical Students For Choice works to expand abortion education in medical schools; Family Planning Fellowships pays residents to learn abortion and contraception; and Ryan Programs gives schools seed money for abortion training.

Nonexistent only a decade ago, Ryan-funded programs now train abortion providers on 58 campuses. And women now comprise 81 percent of all students studying to be ob-gyns, up from only 30 percent in 1980.

The new generation of female students "has more belief in themselves," said Lois Backus, 56, director of Medical Students For Choice. "They don't want to be told what they can't do."

Trend troubles some

The shift is possible, despite political opposition, because private dollars are supporting programs that can't get public funding, said bioethicist Arthur Caplan of the University of Pennsylvania.

"Education about abortion is not the same as advocating for abortion," he said. "Medical schools feel that abortion is a medical procedure that doctors need to know about. We have all kinds of topics in medical education, like physician-assisted suicide, but that doesn't mean we're in favor of them."

A 2009 Gallup poll suggested a shift in public opinion on abortion, with more Americans (51 percent) now calling themselves "pro-life." And efforts are under way to cut public funding for programs like Planned Parenthood.

Many abortion opponents find it troubling that medical schools are spending more time teaching about family planning.

"Medical schools are teaching something that is not medicine," said Troy Newman, president of the group Operation Rescue. "Doctors are supposed to save lives. This is no cure, or treatment. This is no advanced technical procedure that needs special training. ... It's murder, not medicine."

Shift at Stanford

Stanford followed UCSF's lead in expanding abortion education and training in 2007. That's when the university recruited Dr. Paul Blumenthal, a national leader in family planning research, away from Johns Hopkins.

Stanford, "like many major university medical centers around the country, increasingly recognizes that family planning services, including abortion care, are an integral mainstream component of women's health care," Blumenthal said.

Flynn LaRochelle, 27, grew up in a conservative Napa family but was excited to come to Stanford to study under Blumenthal and learn how to help low-income women.

"Without providers, there really is no choice. If women don't have access, what's the point of it being legal?" said LaRochelle, who graduated from UCSD with a 3.9 GPA, water polo awards and Spanish fluency. "People come here to get trained. The hope -- the goal -- is to go to other parts of the country and try to provide care."

Raised Catholic, LaRochelle was inspired by author Alice Walker and helping poor pregnant women in Latin America. She remains spiritual; in her perfect world, free access to contraception would end abortion.

"I am passionate about women being able to create their own futures and opportunities," she said.

Forcing change

But in her first year at Stanford, she was startled to discover that the topic of abortion was scarcely mentioned -- so she successfully lobbied to add a full 50-minute lecture on the subject.

In her second year, she hosted a "papaya workshop," where the fruit is a model uterus to practice techniques. In her third year, she helped recruit new leaders to Medical Students For Choice. Entering her final year, she encouraged Stanford to create a formal two-week Family Planning elective.

Warden, further along in schooling than LaRochelle, now trains at UCSF. She grew up in Overland, Kan., to supportive but conservative parents. Her father voted for Reagan; her sister opposes abortion.

One patient, in particular, influenced her. The woman was in her 30s and desperately wanted a child. Then, four months into her pregnancy, she was diagnosed with aggressive pelvic cancer.

"She had to make this decision to terminate," Warden recalls. "It was unbelievably tragic."

Since then, Warden said she has gained experience ending other pregnancies, all reluctantly. In some, fetuses have no brains. In others, fetal growth threatens the lungs or heart of the mother. She dreams of a future as a university professor, teaching others, and serving as a national advocate for abortion access.

"It has strengthened in me a conviction that it is incredibly important," she said.

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- Since 1982, the number of abortion providers has declined by 37 percent. Now only 2 percent of ob-gyns perform half of all abortions in the country.
- While one-quarter of counties in California have no known abortion provider, 87 percent of counties across the country do not.

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