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Abortion Foes Face Enemy At Doctor's Negligence Trial

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NEWARK, Nov. 21— When a physician who filled in for a murdered abortion-clinic doctor in Pensacola, Fla., came before an administrative court in New Jersey today on malpractice charges growing out of previous abortions, he saw two particularly unfriendly faces in the courtroom.

They belonged to Vicky and Mike Conroy, abortion opponents who had traveled 1,000 miles from Pensacola "to see justice served."

"We wanted to see for ourselves if the courts care more about dead doctors than dead women," Mrs. Conroy said.

There are no "dead women" in the three cases cited by the State Attorney General's office in its bid to lift the medical license of Dr. Stephen Chase Brigham, who lives in Connecticut. But the 37-year-old physician -- whose medical license has already been suspended in New York State -- is charged with negligence and incompetence in his treatment of two women from New Jersey and one from Pennsylvania who paid him to perform second-trimester abortions.

Dr. Brigham, who said he has a Ph.D. in medicine from Columbia University and said he was descended from the physician who is the namesake of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, performed abortions at a Pensacola clinic after Dr. John C. Britton was gunned down there in July. Paul Hill, an abortion protester, recently was convicted of the murders and sentenced to death.

While Dr. Brigham's activity in Pensacola has made him a target of abortion opponents like the Conroys, it is the quality of his doctoring that was at issue before the State Board of Medical Examiners today.

A state expert witness in obstetrics, Dr. David I. Hollander, testified that Dr. Brigham deviated from generally accepted medical standards in the three cases that resulted in charges.

Dr. Brigham, who has had no formal training in obstetrics and gynecology, has denied all charges. He has argued that in the course of the hundreds of abortions he performed safely, some mishaps might occur.

In the first case, a fetus carried by a New Jersey woman who was 26 weeks pregnant was aborted by Dr. Brigham in a Spring Valley, N.Y., clinic last November. Dr. Hollander said medical records showed that Dr. Brigham, unassisted by professional staff, failed to suture a laceration in the woman's cervix and delayed getting help for her in a hospital until she had lost a great deal of blood and was going into shock. Surgeons at the hospital performed a hysterectomy, Dr. Hollander said, to pull the woman out of danger.

In the case of the second New Jersey woman, who was 24 weeks pregnant when Dr. Brigham performed an abortion at a Flushing, Queens, clinic, a four-inch perforation was caused in her uterus and colon by instruments, Dr. Hollander testified. He said that the perforation initially went unnoticed by Dr. Brigham.

When asked by a deputy assistant attorney general, Linda Ershow-Levenberg, whether one mishap could have caused the extensive injury, Dr. Hollander replied: "I don't see anatomically how that was possible."

The Pennsylvania woman, who was 23 weeks pregnant, had come to Dr. Brigham's clinic in Voorhees, N.J., for an abortion. On her first visit, Dr. Brigham inserted materials called laminaria strips in her uterus to induce an abortion, according to the allegations against him. On her return the next day, new strips were introduced although the woman's water had broken.

An infection and high fever developed, and the woman went to an emergency room in New Brunswick for treatment, according to official reports.

The state requires that second-trimester abortions be performed only at hospitals or licensed ambulatory care facilities. Dr. Brigham does not hold hospital privileges in New Jersey.

The Conroys, who are not directly involved in the case against Dr. Brigham, run Legal Action for Women, a nonprofit group that encourages women to recover damages from physicians who injure them during abortions. They said that since 1985, their organization had helped some 250 women across the nation file lawsuits against doctors and abortion clinics.

The law, they said, allows unqualified doctors with no specialized training to perform abortions.

"We brought Pensacola to Newark to see that states like New Jersey and Florida hold abortionists like Dr. Brigham accountable for their actions," said Mrs. Conroy, 40, a mother of 10 children. "I do feel a responsibility to make his record well known. This man poses a health threat to all women."

But Nathan L. Dembin, a lawyer for Dr. Brigham, suggested that people like the Conroys have another agenda. "Their strategy is to exert additional pressure on abortion providers," he said

during a break in today's proceedings. "They care more about getting rid of a woman's right to have an abortion than their health."

A decision in Dr. Brigham's case is not expected until at least next spring.

Photos: An abortion protester from Pensacola, Fla., Vicky Conroy, left, came to Newark for the malpractice hearing of Dr. Stephen Brigham, right, which grew out of three New Jersey abortion cases. "I do feel a responsibility to make his record well known," she said. Dr. Brigham, who worked in Pensacola as a replacement for a murdered abortion-clinic doctor, and his lawyer, Nathan L. Dembin, deny the charges. (Photographs by William E. Sauro/The New York Times)