

# ACOG: Student Externs Commit to Offering Abortion Services

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by Paula Moyer

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SAN FRANCISCO, May 11 — With fewer and fewer physicians providing abortion services, and those who offer them growing older and older, there may be a new source of practitioners on the horizon.

Since 1996 nearly 500 medical students have participated in elective externships that focused on abortion techniques, and many students say are committed to include the service in their practices when they graduate, according to a report at the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists meeting here.

The externships were created by a group called Medical Students for Choice, which is based on Oakland, Calif., and Melissa D. Fritsche, a third-year student at the Medical College of Georgia, who is the group's president. She says the externships are facilitating a new generation of physicians who can step in to succeed the current dwindling pool of abortion providers.

Fritsche presented a survey of the views of 114 of the externs who participated from 2002 to 2004. She said that 79.8% of them responded that they would "definitely" or "probably" be willing to provide abortions in their practices.

The other 20.2% said that they were "undecided" or would "probably not" provide those services. Among those who said they would "probably not" provide the serviced, the most common reason was incompatibility of prospective specialty (e.g., dermatology).

Of the ob-gyn abortion providers in the U.S., 57% are over 50 years old, she said, and 87% of the nation's counties have no abortion facilities. "The people who provide abortions are retiring and medical students are not being trained in the procedures."

It was for this reason, she said, that Medical Students for Choice created the externship opportunity.

The survey did not ask the externs about their prospective specialties. However, according to Lois Backus, the executive director of Medical Students for Choice, about a quarter of the members intend to go into ob-gyn; another quarter into family practice, and the remaining half are "all over the map."

Although Fritsche is hopeful that the externships will increase the number of providers, there are other challenges, including but not exclusively those related to safety, Fritsche she said.

Ironically, the freestanding abortion clinic, the hallmark of legal abortion in the U.S., may be one of the challenges, Fritsche said. "The lack of affiliation with a hospital marginalizes abortion services and makes it difficult for students to be exposed to abortion care," she said.

Fritsche believes that a lack of exposure to abortion services trumps the safety issue. "In the 1990s, one-third of ob-gyns completed training without having performed abortions," she said.

The study shows how important it is to expose physicians in training to abortion care, said David A. Grimes, M.D., a clinical professor of ob-gyn at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, who was not involved in the study.

"Medical Students for Choice have made a valuable contribution by offering the externship and conducting this study," said Dr. Grimes, who is vice-president for biomedical affairs of Family Health International. "This may be an effective way to address the issue of the graying of abortion providers." However, Dr. Grimes said he had not read the Fritsche study.

*Reviewed by [Robert Jasmer, MD](#) Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco*

#### **Primary Source**

**American College of Obstetrics-Gynecology, 53rd annual meeting, p. 17S of abstract book, #11 of posters for Monday. [Source Reference: Fritsche MD, Cwiak CA, Saks DR. Medical students' intention to provide abortions following the Medical Students for Choice Reproductive Health Externship. P. 17S of abstract book, #11 of posters for Monday.](#)**