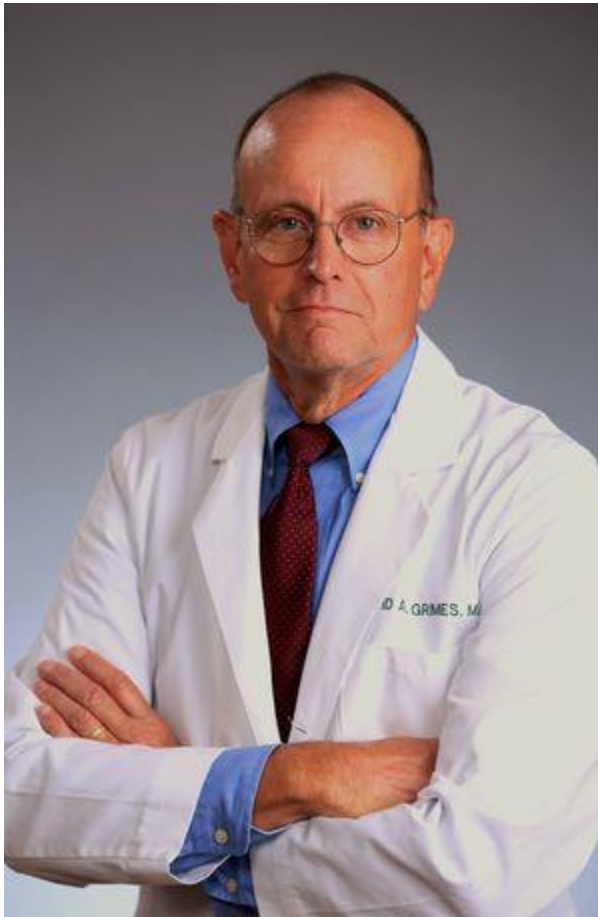


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Susan Ladd: Safe, legal abortion must endure



Dr. David Grimes, author of "Every Third Woman in America: How Legal Abortion Transformed Our Nation."

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By Susan Ladd/News & Record susan.ladd@news-record.com

[Dr. David Grimes](#) recalls what he describes as “the bad old days” before legalized abortion.

A Grimsley High School graduate, Grimes earned a biology degree at Harvard and a medical degree at UNC Chapel Hill, and started practicing medicine when abortion was still illegal.

Entire wards were dedicated to septic infections related to botched abortions, performed by untrained, back-alley practitioners or the women themselves, using everything from sticks to chemicals.

Before the Supreme Court legalized abortion in the [Roe v. Wade](#) decision in 1973, an estimated 200,000 to 1.2 million illegal abortions occurred each year in the U.S. Before the introduction of antibiotics and more effective methods of birth control, more than 1,000 women died from illegal abortions each year.

Illegal abortion became a public health crisis, Grimes recalls, because it was the only option for women desperate to keep from bearing children they couldn’t support or that kept them trapped in bad relationships, poverty or other vulnerable circumstances.

“Women know what they are doing,” Grimes said. “They know whether they are physically, emotionally and economically prepared to have a child.”

Forty-two years ago on Tuesday, *Roe v. Wade* gave women control over their own bodies. Women have been fighting to retain that control ever since.

On their first week in office, members of the 114th Congress reintroduced yet another [law](#) that would restrict access to abortion.

Abortion remains one of the most hotly contested rights of American women, largely because of its political appropriation and reframing by the Republican Party, Grimes said.

A leading abortion scholar, Grimes is board certified in obstetrics, gynecology and preventive medicine. He has worked as an epidemiologist for the CDC, served on the faculty of four medical schools, and teaches currently at the UNC School of Medicine.

Grimes recently published “Every Third Woman in America,” a book that looks at the history of abortion and the laws regarding abortion rights through the eyes of a medical professional.

Abortion — which started as a public health issue — became a political issue in the hands of the Republican Party, starting with Ronald Reagan, Grimes said. It provided an issue that could polarize voters — primarily on religious grounds — above and beyond any other issue.

If you look at states where abortion restrictions have been passed, the single most dominant predictor is not the number of Catholics or any other religion, Grimes said, but Republican dominance of both houses of the legislature and the governor’s office.

More laws restricting abortion were passed between 2010 and 2013 than in the prior decade, Grimes said.

Republicans took control of North Carolina's legislature in the 2011-2012 session, first passing a 2011 law that required women to have an ultrasound before abortion. That law was [struck down](#) by the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals in December, but the state is appealing to the Supreme Court.

After Republican Gov. Pat McCrory took office in 2013, the state passed a law limiting access to abortion and imposing further restrictions on clinics. McCrory [signed the bill](#) despite his clear statement during his campaign that he didn't favor further restrictions on abortion.

Grimes says abortion is also a victim of its own success because few people remember the bad old days — both the horrors of illegal abortions and the constraints on women's lives when they couldn't control how many babies they had.

Reliable birth control and abortion allowed women to enter the workforce and pursue careers in far greater numbers. And women made amazing contributions to the arts, science, medicine, technology, politics and many other fields — not by staying childless but by being able to control how many children they had and when.

Limiting births also helped keep poor women from becoming more impoverished.

“It leveled the playing field, which was especially important for minorities,” Grimes said. “Abortion is a social equalizer in a very profound way.”

But women are a secondary consideration — if they are considered at all — in the pro-life reframing of abortion. An ongoing and well-financed public relations campaign successfully shifted the focus from the woman to the fetus, calling the fetus a baby and calling abortion murder.

From a social and medical perspective, this is absurd, Grimes said.

“To suggest that the rights of a blastocyst [fertilized egg] should trump the needs of a full-grown woman is terribly misogynistic,” Grimes said. “A woman should not be defined by her uterus any more than a man should be defined by his testicles. It's pure and simple misogyny in an ugly, ugly, form, and we need to stand up and call it what it is.”

The attempt to pass a [“personhood”](#) amendment or any law that says life begins at conception flies in the face of medical knowledge, Grimes said.

“Most conceptions don't make it past 6 weeks of pregnancy,” Grimes said. “Natural embryonic losses are about 62 percent. That's a normal part of human reproduction.”

According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, more than half (and perhaps as many as 78 percent) of fertilizations don't result in live births.

“Baby” conjures up images of a newborn, which has awareness, can live independent of its mother and can feel pain. Fertilized eggs and embryos do not possess those qualities.

Despite attempts to pass a “fetal pain” bill, research shows that the nervous system is not developed enough for pain to be transmitted to the brain until 24 to 26 weeks, and nearly all abortions in America occur before that stage of pregnancy.

Additionally, feeling pain is based both in physical development and emotional development based on experience, which a fetus doesn’t have, Grimes said.

Roe v. Wade was based on the right of privacy as outlined in the First, Fourth, Ninth and 14th Amendments, and the court’s belief that marriage, conception and child-rearing belonged in this zone of privacy. It took into account the many forces that come to bear on a pregnant woman, including physical, psychological and economic stresses.

All of those factors came into play with the patients Grimes has encountered over the years.

Most women seeking abortion are unmarried, 61 percent are already mothers, 42 percent live below the federal poverty level, and 65 percent have a religious affiliation.

Many say they are philosophically opposed to abortion, but when faced with the practical reality of unwanted pregnancy, it’s the choice they make, Grimes said.

Forcing women to bear a child is cruel and unfair, particularly because the same political groups are bent on undercutting all the social programs in place to help poor people.

In a very practical way, this political view holds that the right to life begins at conception and ends at birth.

“They [Republican abortion opponents] aren’t pro-life; they’re pro-birth,” Grimes said.

If abortion is outlawed again, women who could afford to do so would travel to wherever they must to obtain legal abortion. Poor women would resort to back alleys and dangerous home methods. Women would die. Some would lead lives compromised by unwanted pregnancies, and research shows the children of those pregnancies would have poorer outcomes.

Forcing women to bear children also is rooted in the idea that women should be punished for exercising sexual freedom, while men can just walk away.

“It’s a fundamental civil right,” Grimes said. “Women will never have an equal chance at what life has to offer until women can control their fertility.”

Because if women can’t control their reproduction, they can’t control their lives or their destinies.

The best way to get someone to understand and sympathize with a position is to equate to something that affects them personally. But there is simply no analogy for men. There is nothing in their physiology that can have such life-altering consequences.

And the right to have an abortion should not be up to any man, whether he is a husband, partner or politician. It shouldn't be up to any other woman, either. Only the person who lives with the consequences should get to make this decision.

It couldn't be simpler. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

If a woman can't control her own reproduction, she cannot control her life, she has lost her liberty, and she is not free to pursue happiness on her own terms.

Period.

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