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The First Legal Abortion Providers Tell Their Stories

By [Alex Ronan](#)

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Photo: Wolfgang Kunz

On October 11, 1972, final arguments for the landmark abortion case *Roe v. Wade* were argued before the United States Supreme Court. Three months later, the decision was released, abortion was made legal, and everything changed — or so the story goes. The truth is that even before

Roe, while few women had access to abortion care and many were forced into horrific back-alley procedures, there were doctors breaking the law by providing terminations.

The Cut spoke to seven doctors who practiced on the cusp of *Roe*; they began providing abortions before *Roe* or in the five years immediately following the ruling of January 22, 1973. As medical students, they witnessed women dying from illegal, often self-induced abortions; as underground practitioners, they risked their livelihoods. Since legalization, they've watched the rise of anti-abortion extremism, with bombings, assassinations, and attacks occurring in clinics around the country. Many are still practicing.

Dr. Curtis Boyd

First abortion performed: 1966

Still practicing

“In the early '60s, I met a lot of women in the counterculture movements and they said, ‘We have some issues too, just so you know.’ And I was like, ‘Oh.’ [*Laughs.*] ‘What are those issues?’ They said, ‘If we’re going to be equal in society, then we have to be able to control our reproduction. We have to be able to choose if and when we’re going to have children and how many. We don’t have that. We’re at the whim of the pregnancies that come along.’ That was a really important realization for me. I hadn’t understood things in that way before.

“A few years later, I was asked if I would be willing to provide abortions by a multid denominational clergy consultation group in Texas. Pastors and priests from all sorts of denominations would refer women to me for abortions. I had a wife, small kids, and I had to decide whether I was willing to take on the risk. Of course, I said yes. It was a matter of conscience.

“The clergy people said, ‘If you’re ever arrested, we’ll testify on your behalf.’ I knew that wouldn’t do anything. If you’ve done abortions when they’re illegal, it doesn’t matter how many priests, ministers, and rabbis testify for you. If you’re doing something illegal and you get caught, you’re gonna have to face the consequences.

“It was organized like an underground railroad. I didn’t have direct contact with the patients until their appointments. The women would contact a member of the clergy who was one of the referral group. The priests set up the appointments. Only they knew who I was, and they were scattered across the country — Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, all over.

“The women came by car, by bus, and by train. They hitchhiked and they walked. Everyone had to go through the referral to get to me. But once we were in contact, I told every woman my name, my telephone number, and my address. Each one came to my office and checked in like any other patient that saw me at my primary-care practice. It was a matter of trust.

“I basically taught myself how to do abortions. Complications were what could get you, the hospital would get suspicious. I had to learn to have a very low complication rate. Honestly, the hardest thing about it was that the women were so desperate. I couldn’t say no. It became my life, it was day and night.”

Dr. Sadjia Greenwood
First abortion performed: 1968
Retired in 2000

“When I was 20 I had an illegal abortion in New York City. Thankfully, my father used his connections so I went to a doctor’s office and had it done by an ob-gyn. I really saw the gap between people that had means and people that didn’t. I got mine in a safe, sterile doctor’s office, and other women weren’t as lucky. Later, when I was in medical school, I saw a woman die of an illegal abortion. It’s something I still think about to this day.

“I provided my first abortion in the late '60s; 1968 was the year 100,000 teens came to San Francisco with flowers in their hair. Although the Pill had been legal since the early '60s, a lot of kids were getting pregnant. So, we started the first teen clinic at a Planned Parenthood where I worked. It was decorated by the teens themselves, with Indian textiles on the ceiling and their photography on the walls. Anyone could come. We didn’t have appointments, because appointments didn’t work. It was marvelous while it lasted and it lasted quite a while.

“The year before, abortion law had been liberalized in California. You had to go before a hospital committee and get approval, or you could get two psychiatrists and a gynecologist to approve your abortion by saying your mental health was at risk. We had a pregnancy counseling service composed of nurses, rabbis, psychiatrists, and a liberal gynecologist. Pregnant clients, whether they were teens or not, could get abortions.

“I performed the abortions in the hospital, which was legally mandated at the time. The women were unbelievably relieved that they didn’t have to try find someone who would do it on someone’s kitchen table.

“When *Roe* passed, it was just fantastic. The next day, we rolled one of the vacuum pumps [used in most first-trimester abortions] out of the UCSF hospital and took it over to Planned Parenthood so we could start doing abortions there. Abortions cost \$25 back then.

“After *Roe*, I didn’t think about the backlash. We were so busy fixing things and setting up good services. I just want people to realize that it’s not a question of whether abortion is legalized or not, it’s a question of whether women are going to have one that’s medically safe or terribly unsafe. Every society that we know of, there have been abortions. Women are just as desperate not to have children as they are to have children.”

Dr. David Grimes
First abortion performed: 1972
Retired in 2014

“Abortion in the U.S. has become a victim of its own success; an entire generation of Americans have grown up without seeing or understanding what the dark days of before *Roe* were like. Without understanding that history, you can’t fully appreciate what the right to choice means.

“When I was in medical school in North Carolina, I got a page one night to tend to a patient with a 106 degree fever. I assumed that number was made in error. It wasn’t. When I examined her I found a red rubber catheter protruding from her cervix. Another day, I was paged for a young co-ed in septic shock with barely any blood pressure. There was a fetal foot protruding from her cervix. The first had gotten an illegal abortion, the second had tried to do it herself.

“In North Carolina, the laws changed in 1970 and we became a provider. I did my first abortion in 1972. During Vietnam I served my military requirement at the CDC, working in the Abortion Surveillance Branch where we tracked the public-health benefits of legal abortion. We had access to really unique data and quickly established the safety of abortion as an outpatient procedure.

“The evidence is clear and incontrovertible that abortion is a safe and an important part of women’s health and yet we still see this broad campaign of deception. You’re actually twice as likely to die from an injection of penicillin than an abortion, but no one is suggesting penicillin injections happen in a surgical ward.

“The North Carolina General Assembly has been voting in further restrictions to abortion practice. There’s no need for that. There hasn’t been a death from abortion in this state in decades. I’m a licensed boat captain — that’s what I like to do in my spare time. Last year, 23 people died in boating accidents in North Carolina. If the General Assembly truly cared about safety, they could make wearing life jackets mandatory. Boating is much more dangerous than having an abortion.”

Dr. Warren Hern

First abortion performed: 1971*

Still practicing

“As a medical student in the early '60s, I was regularly taking care of women who were suffering and dying from the complications of illegal abortions. There was a woman who had been turned down for an abortion at a nearby hospital. She went home and shot herself in the uterus and then drove herself back to the hospital.

“I wanted to be an epidemiologist. That was my plan. But, after the *Roe* ruling came down I got a call from a doctor asking me to join in starting a nonprofit abortion clinic. I agreed to get involved; for the *Roe* decision to mean anything it had to be implemented. After about two years I took out a loan and opened my own practice on January 22, 1975, the second anniversary of *Roe*. That first week I did three abortions and the practice grew from there. I’ve done it for 40 years now.

“From the beginning, I got death threats. I was living in my house up in the mountains and I started sleeping with a rifle by my bed. I was amazed. How could this be controversial? It was the first time in human history women were able to end pregnancy safely. The death threats were very clear, but I don’t let the anti-choice movement intimidate me into stopping. There are only three things I’m afraid of: lightning, grizzly bears, sharks.

“The anti-abortion fanatics have shown they’ll stop at nothing, including the assassination of a doctor in his church. Dr. [George] Tiller was a really good friend. I miss him. We talked on the phone two or three times a week.

“There have been a number of attempts on my life, but I don’t wear a bulletproof vest anymore. They have been very clear in their letters, saying, ‘Don’t bother with the vest, we’ll go right for a head shot.’ That’s what they did with George. You just never know what’s going to happen.”

Dr. Douglas Laube

First abortion performed: 1973

Still practicing

“When *Roe* was passed I was a second-year resident at the University of Iowa. Within a few months, we were set up to do abortions. I was trained as a general ob-gyn. Back then, many of us expected it would just be one part of our larger practice. We didn’t anticipate that so many doctors would opt out of performing abortions. [*Today, [very few doctors](#) are trained to perform abortions.*]

“After *Roe*, we thought we’d won. We thought it was over.

“I remember back in the '80s, I was sitting on the exam stool with the patient in the middle of a D&C abortion. We were in a basement facility and heard this big noise coming from the ground floor, right above us. Fortunately, there were heavy steel-cased doors, but they had glass windows. An extremist group was using a telephone pole as a battering ram, trying to break through the front door.

“We could hear the breaking of the glass, the pounding against the door, our people were screaming. One nurse ran to call security. The other nurse was trying to calm the patient down. The patient was pleading with us not to leave her. She kept saying, ‘Please don’t leave me, please don’t leave me.’ I couldn’t leave; I had to finish the procedure. I said, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll finish our job.’

“Today, it seems that there’s a little less violence because the right wing has been able to make a lot of legislative changes. The frustration and the desperation they felt in the first 20 or so years has been mollified by their ability to generate meaningful legislation for their side. Back then, I don’t know that any of us thought that there’d be any legislation curtailing abortion. We were very wrong on that, obviously.”

Dr. Suzanne T. Poppema

First abortion performed: 1974

Retired in 2014

“I studied with a famous surgeon who wanted me to do a surgery residency. But I decided to be a family doctor because it felt like the only way I could save the world. [*Laughs.*] I did my residency at University of Washington, where I was one of two female residents.

“My first delivery was previously undiagnosed twins for an 11-year-old. It became obvious my job was going to be to help women who wanted to have babies have them and help others not have them.

“There was one physician on the faculty who had illegally done abortions in his own practice. After *Roe* he taught us how to perform them.

“In those early days, it was a very proud, happy time. There was a lot of good feeling around abortions back in the '70s. Then in the '80s the Reagan years happened. It got really scary when anti-choice activists started shooting doctors.

“For a while, in the Pacific Northwest, I lived in a beautiful little pro-choice bubble. Then in 1994, my friend [Garson Romalis](#) was shot in Vancouver. I couldn't just say, 'Oh it's all the crazy people in the South.' That was scary enough that we had the Feds come out and do a safety analysis. We put in bulletproof glass and double-locked doors.

“The fact that Garson was shot made me realize it could happen anywhere. What got really hard was knowing the number of people who could work themselves into an absolute froth of hatred because of what I do. My face was on those wanted posters [made by anti-choice extremists]. They would celebrate when there was a murder or injury and put a big red X over the practitioner's photo.

“The thing about terrorism is that it works. But then at least one or two women a week would say, 'Thank God you're here. I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't get an abortion' and we would be reminded of why we were doing what we were doing.

“I find that women tend to apologize if they come back for a second abortion. I always say, 'I'm sure getting an abortion wasn't on your bucket list. I'm flattered you came back.' [*Laughs.*] It is a failure of control over your life. I tell them, 'You can feel as ashamed about this as you need to, but also know that I know you're not here on purpose.'

“Nobody gets pregnant on purpose to get an abortion. I mean, I had an abortion and I wasn't happy about having one. It's like, you're a Harvard-educated physician for God's sake. What did you think would happen when you were on that camping trip and you didn't have your pills?

“No matter how much you shame and scare them, women will still come for abortions. Pretty recently I had this young woman, 15 maybe, and we did the procedure. I said, 'Your uterus is empty, the procedure is over. I have to go check to make sure we got everything,' and I left the room to examine the tissue. Then I came back and told her, 'Everything's fine, your uterus is healthy.' And she said, 'So ... when are you going to use the steel ball?' I picked my jaw up off the floor and said, 'Steel ball?' She said, 'Well, I went to the crisis pregnancy center and they told me you're going to put a steel ball that's covered with sharp blades into my uterus and twirl it around.' And this kid still came! I was thinking, *How did you ever make yourself walk in the office believing I was going to do that?*”

Dr. Wendy Chavkin

First abortion performed: 1978

Currently a professor of public health and obstetrics/gynecology at Columbia University

“*Roe* happened while I was in college. As a very young woman myself, it seemed that if women couldn’t have control over whether or not they were going to be pregnant or have children, they couldn’t proceed with much else. So I decided to go to medical school to do gynecology, contraception, and abortion.

“Half a dozen years after *Roe*, I did my training in New York. I did a public-health residency and then became the director of what was then called the Bureau of Maternal Services and Family Planning for New York City’s Health Department. I met all the heads of the ob-gyn and pediatric departments around the city. I once had a conversation with the man who was the head of ob-gyn at Lenox Hill; he was a devout and very conservative Catholic. But he’d seen women die of botched abortions resulting in gas gangrene of the uterus. He told me, ‘Anybody who has ever seen a 13-year-old die like that has to support abortion.’”

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated the year Dr. Warren Hern first performed an abortion. It was 1971, not 1973. We've also edited the story to make clear that Dr. Hern was involved in launching the nonprofit abortion clinic from the beginning. We regret the errors.*