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Abortion doctors' ranks growing thin in Alabama

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Article excerpt (taken from OCR text)

MONTGOMERY Staring through thick bifocals, Dr. Richard Stuntz looks too old to be living out of hotels. He looks too tired to commute the thousands of miles between the three Alabama clinics where he works and his home. One of fewer than six doctors who perform abortions in Alabama, the 71-year-old physician is part of a small, aging group, that practices amid death threats, vandalism and periodic violence. With three of the doctors in Alabama older than 65, the group seems destined to shrink further.

"The ante has changed, the involvement has changed, the risk has changed," Stuntz said, before pulling on his surgical gown at Reproductive Health Services in Montgomery. "I really didn't think it would escalate this far."

THE SLAYING of Dr. David Gunn, who was shot March 10 behind a Pensacola, Fla., abortion clinic, for many physicians was born out of years of death threats and vandalism that finally spun out of control, doctors said. In the last month, a few abortion physicians in the South have quit but most continue. They are quick to call the police these days and careful about tipping off protesters to their hours and their routes.

Fearing harassment, Stuntz will not say where he lives, only that he flies to Montgomery from a distance of five states. He does not want his picture in the paper. His schedule is a secret. Despite the risks, like many of his fellow doctors, he bristles at being called a crusader for abortion rights. "That's going a bit too far," he said on a rainy Saturday morning at a Montgomery clinic. But if he is not a crusader, he admits performing abortions has become more than just a job.

"Financially, I don't have to do this," Stuntz said. Even his wife, a strong abortion-rights supporter who cried the night Gunn was shot, would like him to stop. "She asks, 'Why can't someone else take your place,'" he said softly, his shoulders slumped and a plane ticket hanging out of his wrinkled suit. "I do this because there is no one else."

For both sides in the abortion standoff, progress frequently is measured by statistics: the number of doctors practicing, the number of clinics still open, the number of abortions performed.

"Ten years ago I couldn't guess how many doctors there were who performed abortions in Alabama, there were so many," said K.B. Kohls of the Beacon Women's Center in Montgomery. "Today it has become very hard to find good physicians."

For anti-abortion groups, who have called the doctors the "weak link" in the abortion-rights struggle, the decrease means success. Said Walter Carroll of the Alabama Pro-Life Commission, "I think it's become important to put pressure on the abortionist. We want his family to know what he does. We want his neighbors to know what he does."

Intent on keeping clinics open, doctors visit clinics in several states each week. Their pay averages between \$150,000 and \$200,000 a year, which is relatively low when compared to other medical practices, abortion-rights activists said.

THOSE WHO have felt the decline of doctors performing abortions most are the doctors themselves. Dr. Thomas Tucker works six days a week and about 12 hours a day at clinics in Alabama and Mississippi, including Montgomery Women's Medical Center in place of Gunn. At a Birmingham clinic where he works, chicken wire recently was placed across the front gate.